

A Special Bond!

Here's a treat for Ruskin Bond fans - Ruskin Bond's Children's Omnibus!

This superbly illustrated volume contains many of Ruskin Bond's best stories, including the ever-popular *Grandfather's Private Zoo*, written over twenty-five years ago and a firm favourite with two generations of children.

At sixty, Bond's writing is as vigorous and vivid as ever, as you will find in his most recent story, *Dust on the Mountain*, which deals with issues that are of vital interest today.

Also in this collection are two of Ruskin Bond's most successful story books - *Angry River* and *The Blue Umbrella*, which have been published in England, USA, France, Holland and Denmark. His charming cameos of small-town life in northern India are to be found in the stories in *The Road to the Bazaar*, while the hilarious *Ghost Trouble* and *Cricket for the Crocodile* add that little extra icing to the cake.

For those who love India, good stories, and simple but elegant writing, this is more than a party, it's a banquet!

Ruskin Bond was born in Kasauli in 1934. He grew up in Jamnagar, Simla and Dehradun; spent a few years abroad, came back to India when he was 21 and has never been away since! Although unmarried, he has a large adopted family.

Rupa & Co

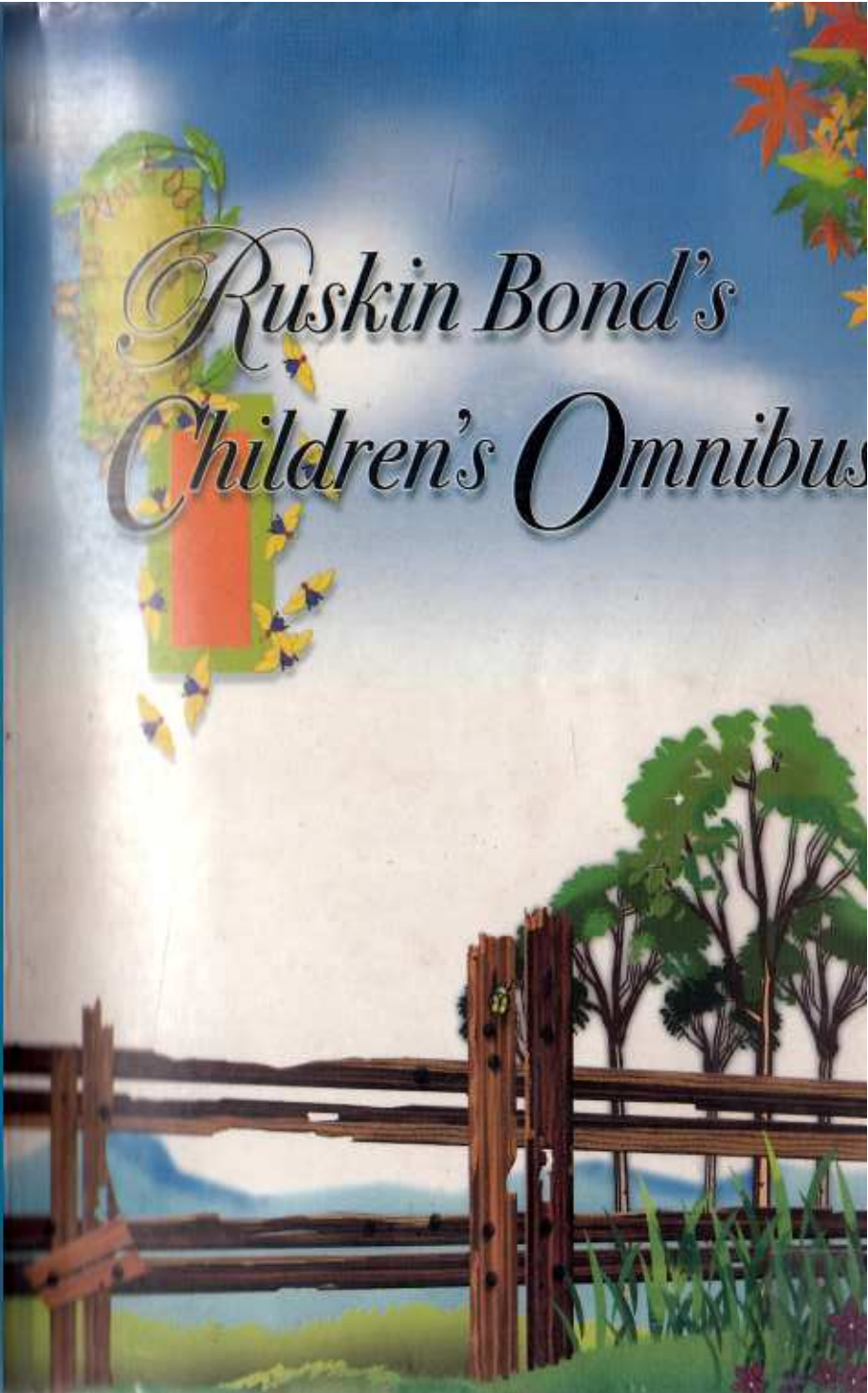
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Ruskin Bond's Children's Omnibus



Dust on the Mountain

Winter came and went, without so much as a drizzle. The hillside was brown all summer and the fields were bare. The old plough that was dragged over the hard ground by Bisnu's lean oxen made hardly any impression. Still, Bisnu kept his seeds ready for sowing. A good monsoon, and there would be plenty of maize and rice to see the family through the next winter.

Summer went its scorching way, and a few clouds gathered on the south-western horizon.

"The monsoon is coming," announced Bisnu.

His sister Puja was at the small stream, washing clothes. "If it doesn't come soon, the stream will dry up," she said. "See, it's only a trickle this year. Remember when there were so many different flowers growing here on the banks of the stream? This year there isn't one."

"The winter was dry. It did not even snow," said Bisnu.

"I cannot remember another winter when there was no snow," said his mother. "The year your father died, there was so much snow the villagers could not light his funeral-pyre for hours.... And now there are fires every-

where." She pointed to the next mountain, half-hidden by the smoke from a forest fire.

At night they sat outside their small house, watching the fire spread. A red line stretched right across the mountain. Thousands of Himalayan trees were perishing in the flames. Oaks, deodars, maples, pines; trees that had taken hundreds of years to grow. And now a fire started carelessly by some woodcutters had been carried up the mountain with the help of the dry grass and a strong breeze. There was no one to put it out. It would take days to die down.

"If the monsoon arrives tomorrow, the fire will go out," said Bisnu, ever the optimist. He was only twelve, but he was the man in the house; he had to see that there was enough food for the family and for the oxen, for the big black dog and the hens.

There were clouds the next day but they brought only a drizzle.

"It's just the beginning," said Bisnu as he placed a bucket of muddy water on the steps.

"It usually starts with a heavy downpour," said his mother.

But there were to be no downpours that year. Clouds gathered on the horizon but they were white and puffy and soon disappeared. True monsoon clouds would have been dark and heavy with moisture. There were other signs — or lack of them — that warned of a long dry summer. The birds were silent, or simply absent. The Himalayan barbet, who usually heralded the approach of the monsoon with strident calls from the top of a spruce

tree, hadn't been seen or heard. And the cicadas, who played a deafening overture in the oaks at the first hint of rain, seemed to be missing altogether.

Puja's apricot tree usually gave them a basket full of fruit every summer. This year it produced barely a handful of apricots, lacking juice and flavour. The tree looked ready to die, its leaves curled up in despair. Fortunately there was a store of walnuts, and a binful of wheat-grain and another of rice stored from the previous year, so they would not be entirely without food; but it looked as though there would be no fresh fruit or vegetables. And there would be nothing to store away for the following winter. Money would be needed to buy supplies in Tehri, some thirty miles distant. And there was no money to be earned in the village.

"I will go to Mussoorie and find work," announced Bisnu. "But Mussoorie is a two-day journey by bus," said his mother.

"There is no one there who can help you. And you may not get any work."

"In Mussoorie there is plenty of work during the summer. Rich people come up from the plains for their holidays. It is full of hotels and shops and places where they can spend their money."

"But they won't spend any money on *you*."

"There is money to be made there. And if not, I will come home. I can walk back over the Nag Tibba mountain. It will take only two and a half days and I will save the bus fare!"

"Don't go, *bhai*," pleaded Puja. "There will be no one

to prepare your food — you will only get sick.”

But Bisnu had made up his mind so he put a few belongings in a cloth shoulder-bag, while his mother prised several rupee-coins out of a cache in the wall of their living room. Puja prepared a special breakfast of *parathas* and an egg scrambled with onions, the hen having laid just one for the occasion. Bisnu put some of the *parathas* in his bag. Then, waving goodbye to his mother and sister, he set off down the road from the village.

After walking for a mile, he reached the highway where there was a hamlet with a bus stop. A number of villagers were waiting patiently for a bus. It was an hour late but they were used to that. As long as it arrived safely and got them to their destination, they would be content. They were patient people. And although Bisnu wasn't quite so patient, he too had learnt how to wait — for late buses and late monsoons.

Along the valley and over the mountains went the little bus with its load of frail humans.

“How tiny we are,” thought Bisnu, looking up at the towering peaks and the immensity of sky. “Each of us no more than a raindrop.... And I wish we had a few raindrops!”

There were still fires burning to the north but the road went south, where there were no forests anyway, just bare brown hillsides. Down near the river there were small paddy fields but unfortunately rivers ran downhill and not uphill, and there was no inexpensive way in which the water could be brought up the steep slopes to the fields that depended on rainfall.

Bisnu stared out of the bus window at the river running far below. On either bank huge boulders lay exposed, for the level of the water had fallen considerably during the past few months.

“Why are there no trees here?” he asked aloud, and received the attention of a fellow passenger, an old man in the next seat who had been keeping up a relentless dry coughing. Even though it was a warm day, he wore a woolen cap and had an old muffler wrapped about his neck.

“There were trees here once,” he said, “but the contractors took the deodars for furniture and houses. And the pines were tapped to death for resin. And the oaks were stripped of their leaves to feed the cattle — you can still see a few tree-skeletons if you look hard — and the bushes that remained were finished off by the goats!”

“When did all this happen?” asked Bisnu.

“A few years ago. And it's still happening in other areas, although it's forbidden now to cut trees. The only forests that remain are in out-of-the-way places where there are no roads.” A fit of coughing came over him, but he had found a good listener and was eager to continue. “The road helps you and me to get about but it also makes it easier for others to do mischief. Rich men from the cities come here and buy up what they want — land, trees, people!”

“What takes you to Mussoorie, uncle?” asked Bisnu politely. He always addressed elderly people as uncle or aunt.

“I have a cough that won't go away. Perhaps they can do something for it at the hospital in Mussoorie. Doctors

don't like coming to villages, you know — there's no money to be made in villages. So we must go to the doctors in the towns. I had a brother who could not be cured in Mussoorie. They told him to go to Delhi. He sold his buffaloes and went to Delhi, but there they told him it was too late to do anything. He died on the way back. I won't go to Delhi. I don't wish to die amongst strangers."

"You'll get well, uncle," said Bisnu.

"Bless you for saying so. And you — what takes you to the big town?"

"Looking for work — we need money at home."

"It is always the same. There are many like you who must go out in search of work. But don't be led astray. Don't let your friends persuade you to go to Bombay to become a film star! It is better to be hungry in your village than to be hungry on the streets of Bombay. I had a nephew who went to Bombay. The smugglers put him to work selling *afeem* — opium — and now he is in jail. Keep away from the big cities, boy. Earn your money and go home."

"I'll do that, uncle. My mother and sister will expect me to return before the summer season is over."

The old man nodded vigorously and began coughing again. Presently he dozed off. The interior of the bus smelt of tobacco smoke and petrol fumes and as a result Bisnu had a headache. He kept his face near the open window to get as much fresh air as possible, but the dust kept getting into his mouth and eyes.

Several dusty hours later the bus got into Mussoorie, honking its horn furiously at everything in sight. The



passengers, looking dazed, got down and went their different ways. The old man trudged off to the hospital.

Bisnu had to start looking for a job straightaway. He needed a lodging for the night and he could not afford the cheapest of the hotels. So he went from one shop to another, and to all the little restaurants and eating-places, asking for work — anything in exchange for a bed, a meal, and a minimum wage. A boy at one of the sweet shops told him there was a job at the Picture Palace, one of the town's three cinemas. The hill station's main road was crowded with people, for the season was just starting. Most of them were tourists who had come up from Delhi and other large towns.

The street lights had come on, and the shops were lighting up, when Bisnu presented himself at the Picture Palace.

The man who ran the cinema's tea-stall had just sacked the previous helper for his general clumsiness. Whenever he engaged a new boy (which was fairly often) he started him off with the warning:

"I will be keeping a record of all the cups and plates you break, and their cost will be deducted from your salary at the end of the month."

As Bisnu's salary had been fixed at fifty rupees a month, he would have to be very careful if he was going to receive any of it.

"In my first month," said Chittru, one of the three tea-stall boys, "I broke six cups and five saucers, and my pay came to three rupees! Better be careful!"

Bisnu's job was to help prepare the tea and samosas,

serve these refreshments to the public during intervals in the film, and later wash up the dishes. In addition to his salary, he was allowed to drink as much tea as he wanted or could hold in his stomach.

Bisnu went to work immediately and it was not long before he was as well-versed in his duties as the other two tea-boys, Chittru and Bali. Chittru was an easy-going, lazy boy who always tried to place the brunt of his work on someone else's shoulders. But he was generous and lent Bisnu five rupees during the first week. Bali, besides being a tea-boy, had the enviable job of being the poster-boy. As the cinema was closed during the mornings, Bali would be busy either in pushing the big poster-board around Mussoorie, or sticking posters on convenient walls.

"Posters are very useful," he claimed. "They prevent old walls from falling down."

Chittru had relatives in Mussoorie and slept at their house. But both Bisnu and Bali were on their own and had to sleep at the cinema. After the last show the hall was locked up, so they could not settle down in the expensive seats as they would have liked! They had to sleep in the foyer, near the ticket-office, where they were often at the mercy of icy Himalayan winds.

Bali made things more comfortable by setting his poster-board at an angle to the wall, which gave them a little alcove where they could sleep protected from the wind. As they had only one blanket each, they placed their blankets together and rolled themselves into a tight warm ball.

During shows, when Bisnu took the tea around, there was nearly always someone who would be rude and offensive. Once when he spilt some tea on a college student's shoes, he received a hard kick on the shin. He complained to the tea-stall owner, but his employer said, "The customer is always right. You should have got out of the way in time!"

As he began to get used to this life, Bisnu found himself taking an interest in some of the regular customers.

There was, for instance, the large gentleman with the soup-strainer moustache, who drank his tea from the saucer. As he drank, his lips worked like a suction pump, and the tea, after a brief agitation in the saucer, would disappear in a matter of seconds. Bisnu often wondered if there was something lurking in the forests of that gentleman's upper lip, something that would suddenly spring out and fall upon him! The boys took great pleasure in exchanging anecdotes about the peculiarities of some of the customers.

Bisnu had never seen such bright, painted women before. The girls in his village, including his sister Puja, were good-looking and often sturdy; but they did not use perfumes or make-up like these more prosperous women from the towns of the plains. Wearing expensive clothes and jewellery, they never gave Bisnu more than a brief, bored glance. Other women were more inclined to notice him, favouring him with kind words and a small tip when he took away the cups and plates. He found he could make a few rupees a month in tips; and when he received his first month's pay, he was able to send most

of it home.

Chittru accompanied him to the post office and helped him to fill in the money-order form. Bisnu had been to the village school, but he wasn't used to forms and official paper-work. Chittru, a town boy, knew all about them, even though he could just read and write.

Walking back to the cinema, Chittru said, "We can make more money at the limestone quarries."

"All right, let's try it," said Bisnu.

"Not now," said Chittru, who enjoyed the busy season in the hill station. "After the season — after the monsoon."

But there was still no monsoon to speak of, just an occasional drizzle which did little to clear the air of the dust that blew up from the plains. Bisnu wondered how his mother and sister were faring at home. A wave of homesickness swept over him. The hill station, with all its glitter, was just a pretty gift box with nothing inside.

One day in the cinema Bisnu saw the old man who had been with him on the bus. He greeted him like a long lost friend. At first the old man did not recognise the boy, but when Bisnu asked him if he had recovered from his illness, the old man remembered and said, "So you are still in Mussoorie, boy. That is good. I thought you might have gone down to Delhi to make more money." He added that he was a little better and that he was undergoing a course of treatment at the hospital. Bisnu brought him a cup of tea and refused to take any money for it; it could be included in his own quota of free tea. When the show was over, the old man went his way and Bisnu did not see

him again.

In September the town began to empty. The taps were running dry or giving out just a trickle of muddy water. A thick mist lay over the mountain for days on end, but there was no rain. When the mists cleared, an autumn wind came whispering through the deodars.

At the end of the month the manager of the Picture Palace gave everyone a week's notice, a week's pay, and announced that the cinema would be closing for the winter.

Bali said, "I'm going to Delhi to find work. I'll come back next summer. What about you, Bisnu, why don't you come with me? It's easier to find work in Delhi."

"I'm staying with Chittru," said Bisnu. "We may work at the quarries."

"I like the big towns," said Bali. "I like shops and people and lots of noise. I will never go back to my village. There is no money there, no fun."

Bali made a bundle of his things and set out for the bus stand. Chittru bought himself a pair of cheap shoes, for the old ones had fallen to pieces. With what was left of his money, he sent another money-order home. Then he and Chittru set out for the limestone quarries, an eight-mile walk from Mussoorie.

They knew they were nearing the quarries when they saw clouds of limestone dust hanging in the air. The dust hid the next mountain from view. When they did see the mountain, they found that the top of it was missing — blasted away by dynamite to enable the quarriers to get at the rich strata of limestone rock below the surface.

The skeletons of a few trees remained on the lower slopes. Almost everything else had gone — grass, flowers, shrubs, birds, butterflies, grasshoppers, ladybirds.... A rock lizard popped its head out of a crevice to look at the intruders. Then, like some prehistoric survivor, it scuttled back into its underground shelter.

"I used to come here when I was small," announced Chittru cheerfully.

"Were the quarries here then?"

"Oh, no. My friends and I — we used to come for the strawberries. They grew all over this mountain. Wild strawberries, but very tasty."

"Where are they now?" asked Bisnu, looking around at the devastated hillside.

"All gone," said Chittru. "Maybe there are some on the next mountain."

Even as they approached the quarries, a blast shook the hillside. Chittru pulled Bisnu under an overhanging rock to avoid the shower of stones that pelted down on the road. As the dust enveloped them, Bisnu had a fit of coughing. When the air cleared a little, they saw the limestone dump ahead of them.

Chittru, who was older and bigger than Bisnu, was immediately taken on as a labourer; but the quarry foreman took one look at Bisnu and said. "You're too small. You won't be able to break stones or lift those heavy rocks and load them into the trucks. Be off, boy. Find something else to do."

He was offered a job in the labourers' canteen, but he'd had enough of making tea and washing dishes. He

was about to turn round and walk back to Mussoorie when he felt a heavy hand descend on his shoulder. He looked up to find a grey-bearded turbaned Sikh looking down at him in some amusement.

"I need a cleaner for my truck," he said. "The work is easy, but the hours are long!"

Bisnu responded immediately to the man's gruff but jovial manner.

"What will you pay?" he asked.

"Fifteen rupees a day, and you'll get food and a bed at the depot."

"As long as I don't have to cook the food," said Bisnu.

The truck driver laughed. "You might prefer to do so, once you've tasted the depot food. Are you coming on my truck? Make up your mind."

"I'm your man," said Bisnu; and waving goodbye to Chittru, he followed the Sikh to his truck.

A horn blared, shattering the silence of the mountains, and the truck came round the bend in the road. A herd of goats scattered to left and right.

The goatherds cursed as a cloud of dust enveloped them, and then the truck had left them behind and was rattling along the bumpy, unmetalled road to the quarries.

At the wheel of the truck, stroking his grey moustache with one hand, sat Pritam Singh. It was his own truck. He had never allowed anyone else to drive it. Every day he made two trips to the quarries, carrying truckloads of limestone back to the depot at the bottom of the hill. He was paid by the trip and he was always anxious to get in

two trips every day.

Sitting beside him was Bisnu, his new cleaner. In less than a month Bisnu had become an experienced hand at looking after trucks, riding in them, and even sleeping in them. He got on well with Pritam, the grizzled, fifty-year-old Sikh, who boasted of his two well-off sons — one a farmer in the Punjab, the other a wine merchant in far-off London. He could have gone to live with either of them, but his sturdy independence kept him on the road in his battered old truck.

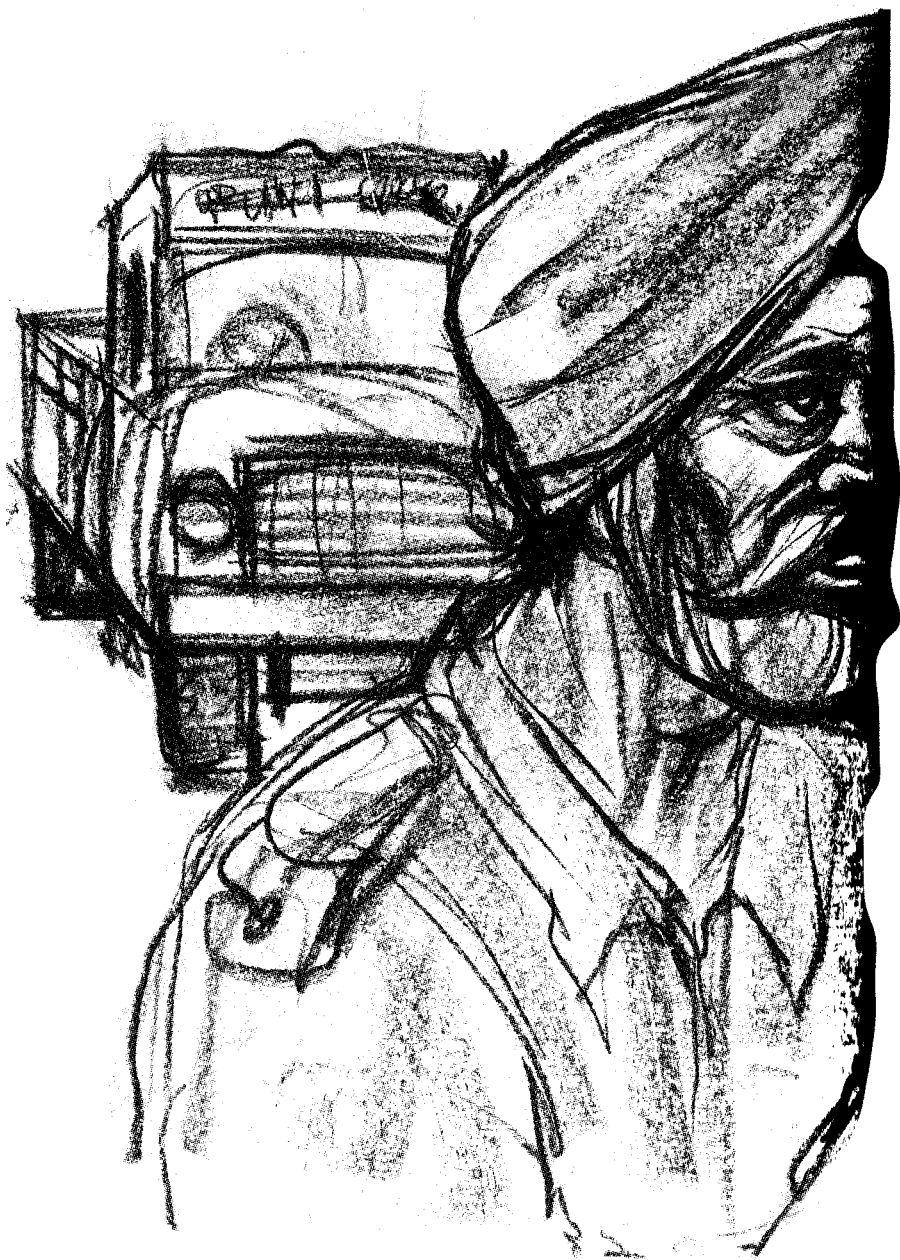
Pritam pressed hard on his horn. Now there was no one on the road — neither beast nor man — but Pritam was fond of the sound of his horn and liked blowing it. He boasted that it was the loudest horn in northern India. Although it struck terror into the hearts of all who heard it — for it was louder than the trumpeting of an elephant — it was music to Pritam's ears.

Pritam treated Bisnu as an equal and a friendly banter had grown between them during their many trips together.

"One more year on this bone-breaking road," said Pritam, "and then I'll sell my truck and retire."

"But who will buy such a shaky old truck," said Bisnu. "It will retire before you do!"

"Now don't be insulting, boy. She's only twenty years old — there are still a few years left in her!" And as though to prove it, he blew the horn again. Its strident sound echoed and re-echoed down the mountain gorge. A pair of wildfowl burst from the bushes and fled to more silent regions.



Pritam's thoughts went to his dinner.

"Haven't had a good meal for days."

"Haven't had a good meal for *weeks*," said Bisnu, although in fact he looked much healthier than when he had worked at the cinema's tea-stall.

"Tonight I'll give you a dinner in a good hotel. Tandoori chicken and rice pullao," Pritam said. He sounded his horn again as though to put a seal on his promise. Then he slowed down, because the road had become narrow and precipitous, and trotting ahead of them was a train of mules.

As the horn blared, one mule ran forward, another ran backward. One went uphill, another went downhill. Soon there were mules all over the place. Pritam cursed the mules and the mule-drivers cursed Pritam; but he had soon left them far behind.

Along this range, all the hills were bare and dry. Most of the forest had long since disappeared.

"Are your hills as bare as these?" asked Pritam.

"No, we still have some trees," said Bisnu, "Nobody has started blasting the hills as yet. In front of our house there is a walnut tree which gives us two baskets of walnuts every year. And there is an apricot tree. But it was a bad year for fruit. There was no rain. And the stream is too far away."

"It will rain soon," said Pritam. "I can smell rain. It is coming from the north. The winter will be early."

"It will settle the dust."

Dust was everywhere. The truck was full of it. The leaves of the shrubs and the few trees were thick with it. Bisnu

could feel the dust under his eyelids and in his mouth. And as they approached the quarries, the dust increased. But it was a different kind of dust now — whiter, stinging the eyes, irritating the nostrils.

They had been blasting all morning.

"Let's wait here," said Pritam, bringing the truck to a halt.

They sat in silence, staring through the windscreen at the scarred cliffs a little distance down the road. There was a sharp crack of explosives and the hillside blossomed outwards. Earth and rocks hurtled down the mountain.

Bisnu watched in awe as shrubs and small trees were flung into the air. It always frightened him — not so much the sight of the rocks bursting asunder, as the trees being flung aside and destroyed. He thought of the trees at home — the walnut, the chestnuts, the pines — and wondered if one day they would suffer the same fate, and whether the mountains would all become a desert like this particular range. No trees, no grass, no water — only the choking dust of mines and quarries.

Pritam pressed hard on his horn again, to let the people at the site know that he was approaching. He parked outside a small shed where the contractor and the foreman were sipping cups of tea. A short distance away, some labourers, Chittru among them, were hammering at chunks of rock, breaking them up into manageable pieces. A pile of stones stood ready for loading, while the rock that had just been blasted lay scattered about the hillside.

"Come and have a cup of tea," called out the contractor.

"I can't hang about all day," said Pritam. "There's another trip to make — and the days are getting shorter. I don't want to be driving by night."

But he sat down on a bench and ordered two cups of tea from the stall. The foreman strolled over to the group of labourers and told them to start loading. Bisnu let down the grid at the back of the truck. Then, to keep himself warm, he began helping Chittru and the men with the loading.

"Don't expect to be paid for helping," said the contractor, for whom every rupee spent was a rupee off his profits.

"Don't worry," said Bisnu. "I don't work for contractors, I work for friends."

"That's right," called out Pritam. "Mind what you say to Bisnu — he's no one's servant!"

The contractor wasn't happy until there was no space left for a single stone. Then Bisnu had his cup of tea and three of the men climbed on the pile of stones in the open truck.

"All right, let's go!" said Pritam. "I want to finish early today — Bisnu and I are having a big dinner!"

Bisnu jumped in beside Pritam, banging the door shut. It never closed properly unless it was slammed really hard. But it opened at a touch.

"This truck is held together with sticking plaster," joked Pritam. He was in good spirits. He started the engine, and blew his horn just as he passed the foreman and

the contractor.

"They are deaf in one ear from the blasting," said Pritam. "I'll make them deaf in the other ear!"

The labourers were singing as the truck swung round the sharp bends of the winding road. The door beside Bisnu rattled on its hinges. He was feeling quite dizzy.

"Not too fast," he said.

"Oh," said Pritam. "And since when did you become nervous about my driving?"

"It's just today," said Bisnu uneasily. "It's a feeling, that's all."

"You're getting old," said Pritam. "That's your trouble."

"I suppose so," said Bisnu.

Pritam was feeling young. He drove faster.

As they swung round a bend, Bisnu looked out of his window. All he saw was the sky above and the valley below. They were very near the edge; but here it was usually like that on this narrow mountain road.

After a few more hairpin bends, the road descended steeply to the valley. Just then a stray mule ran into the middle of the road. Pritam swung the steering wheel over to the right to avoid the mule. The road turned sharply to the left, and the truck went over the edge.

As it tipped over, hanging for a few seconds on the edge of the cliff, the labourers leapt from the back of the truck. It pitched forward, and as it struck a rock outcrop, the loose door burst open. Bisnu was thrown out.

The truck hurtled forward, bouncing over the rocks, turning over on its side and rolling over twice before

coming to rest against the trunk of a scraggy old oak tree. But for the tree, the truck would have plunged several hundred feet down to the bottom of the gorge.

The labourers sat on the hillside, stunned and badly shaken. The other man had picked himself up and was running back to the quarry for help.

Bisnu had landed in a bed of nettles. He was smarting all over, but he wasn't really hurt.

His first impulse was to get up and run back to the road. Then he realised that Pritam was still in the truck.

Bisnu skidded down the steep slope, calling out, "Pritam uncle, are you all right?"

There was no answer.

When Bisnu saw Pritam's arm and half his body jutting out of the open door of the truck, he feared the worst. It was a strange position, half in and half out. Bisnu was about to turn away and climb back up the hill, when he noticed that Pritam had opened a blackened and swollen eye. It looked straight up at Bisnu.

"Are you alive?" whispered Bisnu, terrified.

"What do you think?" muttered Pritam. He closed his eye again.

When the contractor and his men arrived, it took them almost an hour to get Pritam Singh out of the wreckage of the truck, and another hour to get him to the hospital in the next big town. He had broken bones and fractured ribs and a dislocated shoulder. But the doctors said he was repairable — which was more than could be said for the truck.

"So the truck's finished," said Pritam, when Bisnu

came to see him after a couple of days. "Now I'll have to go home and live with my son. And what about you, boy? I can get you a job on a friend's truck."

"No," said Bisnu, "I'll be going home soon."

"And what will you do at home?"

"I'll work on my land. It's better to grow things on the land than to blast things out of it."

They were silent for some time.

"There is something to be said for growing things," said Pritam. "But for that tree, the truck would have finished up at the foot of the mountain, and I wouldn't be here, all bandaged up and talking to you. It was the tree that saved me. Remember that, boy."

"I'll remember. And I won't forget the dinner you promised me, either."

It snowed during Bisnu's last night at the quarries. He slept near Chittru, in a large shed meant for the labourers. The wind blew the snow-flakes in at the entrance; it whistled down the deserted mountain pass. In the morning Bisnu opened his eyes to a world of dazzling whiteness. The snow was piled high against the walls of the shed, and they had some difficulty getting out.

Bisnu joined Chittru at the tea-stall, drank a glass of hot sweet tea, and ate two buns. He said goodbye to Chittru and set out on the long march home. The road would be closed to traffic because of the heavy snow, and he would have to walk all the way.

He trudged over the hills all day, stopping only at small villages to take refreshment. By nightfall he was still ten miles from home. But he had fallen in with other travel-

lers, and with them he took shelter at an inn. They built a fire and crowded round it, and each man spoke of his home and fields and all were of the opinion that the snow and rain had come just in time to save the winter crops. Someone sang, and another told a ghost story. Feeling at home already, Bisnu fell asleep listening to their tales. In the morning they parted and went different ways.

It was almost noon when Bisnu reached his village.

The fields were covered with snow and the mountain stream was in spate. As he climbed the terraced fields to his house, he heard the sound of barking, and his mother's big black mastiff came bounding towards him over the snow. The dog jumped on him and licked his arms and then went bounding back to the house to tell the others.

Puja saw him from the courtyard and ran indoors shouting, "Bisnu has come, my brother has come!"

His mother ran out of the house, calling "Bisnu, Bisnu!"

Bisnu came walking through the fields, and he did not hurry, he did not run; he wanted to savour the moment of his return, with his mother and sister smiling, waiting for him in front of the house. There was no need to hurry now. He would be with them for a long time, and the manager of the Picture Palace would have to find someone else for the summer season... It was his home, and these were his fields! Even the snow was his. When the snow melted he would clear the fields, and nourish them, and make them rich.

He felt very big and very strong as he came striding over the land he loved.

Grandfather's Private Zoo

The Adventures of Toto

Grandfather bought Toto from a tonga-driver for the sum of five rupees. The tonga-driver used to keep the little red monkey tied to a feeding-trough, and the monkey looked so out of place there that Grandfather decided he would add the little fellow to his private zoo.

Toto was a pretty monkey. His bright eyes sparkled with mischief beneath deep-set eyebrows, and his teeth, which were a pearly white, were very often displayed in a smile that frightened the life out of elderly Anglo-Indian ladies. But his hands looked dried-up as though they had been pickled in the sun for many years. Yet his fingers were quick and wicked; and his tail, while adding to his good looks (Grandfather believed a tail would add to anyone's good looks), also served as a third hand. He could use it to hang from a branch; and it was capable of scooping up any delicacy that might be out of reach of his hands.

Grandmother always fussed when Grandfather brought home some new bird or animal. So it was decided that Toto's presence should be kept a secret from

her until she was in a particularly good mood. Grandfather and I put him away in a little closet opening into my bedroom wall, where he was tied securely — or so we thought — to a peg fastened into the wall.

A few hours later, when Grandfather and I came back to release Toto, we found that the walls, which had been covered with some ornamental paper chosen by Grandfather, now stood out as naked brick and plaster. The peg in the wall had been wrenched from its socket, and my school blazer, which had been hanging there, was in shreds. I wondered what Grandmother would say. But Grandfather didn't worry; he seemed pleased with Toto's performance.

"He's clever," said Grandfather. "Given time, I'm sure he could have tied the torn pieces of your blazer into a rope, and made his escape from the window!"

His presence in the house still a secret, Toto was now transferred to a big cage in the servants' quarters where a number of Grandfather's pets lived very sociably together — a tortoise, a pair of rabbits, a tame squirrel and, for a while, my pet goat. But the monkey wouldn't allow any of his companions to sleep at night; so Grandfather, who had to leave Dehra Dun next day to collect his pension in Saharanpur, decided to take him along.

Unfortunately I could not accompany Grandfather on that trip, but he told me about it afterwards. A big black canvas kit-bag was provided for Toto. This, with some straw at the bottom, became his new abode. When the strings of the bag were tied, there was no escape. Toto could not get his hands through the opening, and the



canvas was too strong for him to bite his way through. His efforts to get out only had the effect of making the bag roll about on the floor or occasionally jump into the air — an exhibition that attracted a curious crowd of onlookers on the Dehra Dun railway platform.

Toto remained in the bag as far as Saharanpur, but while Grandfather was producing his ticket at the railway-turnstile, Toto suddenly poked his head out of the bag and gave the ticket-collector a wide grin.

The poor man was taken aback; but, with great presence of mind and much to Grandfather's annoyance, he said, "Sir, you have a dog with you. You'll have to pay for it accordingly."

In vain did Grandfather take Toto out of the bag; in vain did he try to prove that a monkey did not qualify as a dog, or even as a quadruped. Toto was classified a dog by the ticket-collector; and three rupees was the sum handed over as his fare.

Then Grandfather, just to get his own back, took from his pocket our pet tortoise, and said, "What must I pay for this, since you charge for all animals?"

The ticket-collector looked closely at the tortoise, prodded it with his forefinger, gave Grandfather a pleased and triumphant look, and said, "No charge. It is not a dog."

When Toto was finally accepted by Grandmother he was given a comfortable home in the stable, where he had for a companion the family donkey, Nana. On Toto's first night in the stable, Grandfather paid him a visit to see if he was comfortable. To his surprise he found Nana,

without apparent cause, pulling at her halter and trying to keep her head as far as possible from a bundle of hay.

Grandfather gave Nana a slap across her haunches, and she jerked back, dragging Toto with her. He had fastened on to her long ears with his sharp little teeth.

Toto and Nana never became friends.

A great treat for Toto during cold winter evenings was the large bowl of warm water given him by Grandmother for his bath. He would cunningly test the temperature with his hand, then gradually step into the bath, first one foot, then the other (as he had seen me doing), until he was in the water up to his neck. Once comfortable, he would take the soap in his hands or feet, and rub himself all over. When the water became cold, he would get out and run as quickly as he could to the kitchen-fire in order to dry himself. If anyone laughed at him during this performance, Toto's feelings would be hurt and he would refuse to go on with his bath.

One day Toto nearly succeeded in boiling himself alive.

A large kitchen kettle had been left on the fire to boil for tea. And Toto, finding himself with nothing better to do, decided to remove the lid. Finding the water just warm enough for a bath, he got in, with his head sticking out from the open kettle. This was just fine for a while, until the water began to boil. Toto then raised himself a little; but, finding it cold outside, sat down again. He continued hopping up and down for some time, until Grandmother arrived and hauled him, half-boiled, out of the kettle.

If there is a part of the brain especially devoted to mischief, that part was largely developed in Toto. He was always tearing things to pieces. Whenever one of my aunts came near him, he made every effort to get hold of her dress and tear a hole in it.

One day, at lunch-time, a large dish of pullao-rice stood in the centre of the dining-table. We entered the room to find Toto stuffing himself with rice. My grandmother screamed — and Toto threw a plate at her. One of my aunts rushed forward — and received a glass of water in the face. When Grandfather arrived, Toto picked up the dish of pullao and made his exit through a window. We found him in the branches of the jackfruit tree, the dish still in his arms. He remained there all afternoon, eating slowly through the rice, determined on finishing every grain. And then, in order to spite Grandmother, who had screamed at him, he threw the dish down from the tree, and chattered with delight when it broke into a hundred pieces.

Obviously Toto was not the sort of pet we could keep for long. Even Grandfather realised that. We were not well-to-do, and could not afford the frequent loss of dishes, clothes, curtains and wallpaper. So Grandfather found the tonga-driver, and sold Toto back to him — for only three rupees.

The Conceited Python

There was one pet which Grandfather could not keep for very long. Grandmother was tolerant of some birds and animals, but she drew the line at reptiles. Even a chameleon as sweet-tempered as Henry (we will come to him later) made her blood run cold. Grandfather should have known that there was little chance of being allowed to keep a python.

He never could resist buying unusual pets, and while we still had Toto, he paid a snake-charmer in the bazar only four rupees for the young four-foot python that was on display to a crowd of eager boys and girls. Grandfather impressed the gathering by slinging the python over his shoulders and walking home with it.

The first to see them arrive was Toto, swinging from a branch of the jack-fruit tree. One look at the python, ancient enemy of his race, and he fled into the house, squealing with fright. The noise brought Grandmother on to the verandah, where she nearly fainted at the sight of the python curled round Grandfather's throat.

"It will strangle you to death," she cried. "Get rid of it

at once!"

"Nonsense!" said Grandfather. "He's only a young fellow — he'll soon get used to us."

"He might, indeed," said Grandmother, "but I have no intention of getting used to him. And you know your cousin Mabel is coming to stay with us tomorrow. She'll leave the minute she knows there's a snake in the house."

"Well, perhaps we should show it to her as soon as she arrives," said Grandfather, who did not look forward to the visits of relatives any more than I did.

"You'll do no such thing," said Grandmother.

"Well, I can't let it loose in the garden. It might find its way into the poultry house, and then where would we be?"

"Oh, how irritating you are!" grumbled Grandmother. "Lock the thing in the bathroom, then go out and find the man you bought it from, and get him to come here and collect it."

And so, in my awestruck presence, Grandfather took the python into the bathroom and placed it in the tub. After closing the door on it, he gave me a sad look.

"Perhaps Grandmother is right this time," he said. "After all, we don't want the snake to get hold of Toto. And it's sure to be very hungry."

He hurried off to the bazar to look for the snake-charmer, and was gone for about two hours, while Grandmother paced up and down the verandah. When Grandfather returned, looking crestfallen, we knew he had not been able to find the snake-charmer.

"Well, then, kindly take it away yourself," said Grand-

mother. "Leave it in the jungle across the river-bed."

"All right, but let me feed it first," said Grandfather. He produced a plucked chicken (in those days you could get a chicken for less than a rupee), and went into the bathroom, followed, in single file, by myself, Grandmother, and the cook and gardener.

Grandfather opened the door and stepped into the room. I peeped round his legs, while the others stayed well behind. We could not see the python anywhere.

"He's gone," announced Grandfather.

"He couldn't have gone far," said Grandmother. "Look *under* the tub."

We looked under the tub, but the python was not there. Then Grandfather went to the window. "We left it open," he said. "He must have gone this way."

A careful search was made of the house, the kitchen, the garden, the stable and the poultry shed; but the python could not be found anywhere.

"He must have gone over the garden wall," said Grandfather. "He'll be well away by now."

"I certainly hope so," said Grandmother, with a look of relief.

Aunt Mabel arrived the next day for a three-week visit, and for a couple of days Grandfather and I were a little worried in case the python made a sudden appearance; but on the third day, when he did not show up, we felt sure that he had gone for good.

And then, towards evening, we were startled by a scream from the garden. Seconds later Aunt Mabel came flying up the verandah steps, looking as though she had

seen the devil himself.

"In the guava tree!" she gasped. "I was reaching for a guava when I saw it staring at me. The *look* in its eyes! As though it would eat me alive..."

"Calm down, my dear," urged Grandmother, sprinkling eau-de-cologne over my aunt. "Tell us, what *did* you see?"

"A snake!" sobbed Aunt Mabel. "A great boa-constrictor. It must have been twenty feet long! In the guava tree. Its eyes were terrible. And it looked at me in such a *queer* way...."

My grandparents exchanged glances, and Grandfather said: "I'll go out and kill it." Taking hold of an umbrella, he sallied forth into the garden. But when he got to the guava tree, the python had gone.

"Aunt Mabel must have frightened it away," I said.

"Hush," said Grandfather. "We mustn't speak of your aunt in that way." But his eyes were alive with laughter.

After this incident, the python began to make a number of appearances, always in the most unexpected places. Aunt Mabel had another fit when she saw him emerge from beneath a cushion. She packed her bags and left.

The hunt continued.

One morning I saw the python curled up on the dressing-table, gazing at his own reflection in the mirror. I went for Grandfather, but by the time we returned to the room the python had moved on. He was seen in the garden, and once the cook saw him crawling up the iron ladder to the roof. Then we found him on the dressing-

table a second time, admiring himself in the mirror. Evidently he was fascinated by his own reflection.

"All the attention he's getting has probably made him conceited," said Grandfather.

"He's trying to look better for Aunt Mabel," I said. (I regretted this remark because Grandmother overheard and held up my pocket money for the rest of the week.)

"Anyway, now we know his weakness," said Grandfather.

"Are *you* trying to be funny too?" said Grandmother.

"I didn't mean Aunt Mabel," explained Grandfather. "The python is becoming vain, so it should be easier to catch him."

Grandfather set about preparing a large cage, with a mirror at one end. In the cage he left a juicy chicken and several other tasty things. The opening was fitted up with a trap-door.

Aunt Mabel had already left by the time we set up the trap, but we had to go on with the project because we could not have the python prowling about the house indefinitely. A python's bite is not poisonous, but it can swallow a live monkey, and it can be a risky playmate for a small boy.

For a few days nothing happened; and then, as I was leaving for school one morning, I saw the python in the cage. He had eaten everything left out for him, and was curled up in front of the mirror, with something that resembled a smile on his face — if you can imagine a python smiling.

I lowered the trap-door gently, but the python took no

notice of me. Grandfather and the gardener put the cage in a tonga and took it across the river-bed. Opening the trap-door, they left the cage in the jungle. When they went away, the python had made no attempt to get out.

"I didn't have the heart to take the mirror away from him," said Grandfather. "It's the first time I've seen a snake fall in love."

A Hornbill Called Harold

Harold's mother, like all good hornbills, was the most careful of wives; his father, the most easy-going of husbands. In January before the dhak tree burst into flame-red blossom, Harold's father took his wife into a great hole high in the tree trunk, where his father and his father's father had taken their brides at the same time every year. In this weather-beaten hollow, generation upon generation of hornbills had been raised; and Harold's mother, like those before her, was enclosed within the hole by a sturdy wall of earth, sticks and dung.

Harold's father left a small slit in the centre of this wall, to enable him to communicate with his wife whenever he felt like a chat. Walled up in her uncomfortable room, Harold's mother was a prisoner for over two months. During this period an egg was laid, and Harold was born.

In his naked boyhood Harold was no beauty. His most prominent feature was his flaming red bill, matching the blossoms of the flame-tree which were now ablaze, heralding the summer. He had a stomach that could never be filled, despite the best efforts of his parents, who

brought him pieces of jackfruit and berries from the banyan tree.

As he grew bigger, the room became more cramped, and one day his mother burst through the wall, spread out her wings and sailed over the tree-tops. Her husband pretended he was glad to see her about, and played with her, expressing his delight with deep gurgles and throaty chuckles. Then they repaired the wall of the nursery, so that Harold would not fall out.

Harold was quite happy in his cell, and felt no urge for freedom. He was putting on weight and feathers, and acquiring a philosophy of his own. Then something happened to change the course of his life.

One afternoon he was awakened from his siesta by a loud banging on the wall, a banging quite different from that made by his parents. Soon the wall gave way, and there was something large and red staring at him — not his parents' bills, but Grandfather's sun-burnt face and short red beard.

In a moment Harold was seized. He roared lustily and struck out with his bill and feet, but to no purpose. Grandfather had him in a bag, and the young hornbill was added to the zoo on our front verandah.

Harold had a simple outlook, and once he had got over some early attacks of nerves, he began to welcome the approach of strangers. For him, Grandfather and I meant the arrival of food, and he greeted us with craning neck, quivering open bill, and a loud, croaking "*Ka-Ka-Kaee!*" Grandfather gave him a very roomy cage in a sunny corner of the verandah — a palace compared to the

cramped quarters he had grown up in — and a basin of fresh water every day for his bath.

Harold was not beautiful by Indian standards. He had a small body and a large head. But his nature was friendly, and he stayed on good terms with both my grandparents during his twelve years as a member of the household. He would even tolerate my aunts, to whom most of the other pets in the house usually took a strong dislike.

Harold's best friends were those who fed him, and he was willing even to share his food with us, sometimes trying to feed me with his great beak. Eating was a serious business for Harold, and if there was any delay at meal-times he would summon us with raucous barks and vigorous bangs of his bill on the woodwork of his cage.

He loved bananas and dates and balls of boiled rice. I would throw him the rice-balls, and he would catch them in his beak, toss them into the air, and let them drop into his open mouth. He perfected his trick of catching things, and Grandfather trained him to catch a tennis ball thrown with some force from a distance of fifteen yards. Harold would have made an excellent slip-fielder at cricket.

Having no family, profession or religion, Harold gave much time and thought to his personal appearance. He carried a rouge-pot on his person, and used it very skillfully as an item of his morning toilet. This rouge-pot was a small gland situated above the roots of his tail feathers; it produced a rich yellow fluid. Harold would dip into his rouge-pot from time to time and then rub the colour over his feathers and the back of his neck. The colour came

off on one's hands when one touched Harold. I think his colour had some sort of waterproofing effect because he used his colour-pot most during the rains.

Harold never drank anything, not even water, in all the years he stayed with Grandfather. Apparently hornbills get all the liquid they need from their solid food.

Only once did he misbehave. That was when he removed a lighted cigar from the hand of an American friend who was visiting us, and swallowed it. It was a moving experience for Harold, and an unnerving one for our guest. Both had to be given some brandy.

Though Harold drank no water, he loved the rain. We always knew when it was going to rain, because Harold would start chuckling to himself about one hour before the raindrops fell. This used to irritate my aunts. They were always being caught in the rain. Harold would be chuckling when they left the house; and when they returned drenched to the skin, he would be in fits of laughter.

As the storm-clouds gathered, and gusts of wind shook the banana trees, Harold would get very excited, and his chuckle would change to an eerie whistle. "*Wheee...wheee*" he would scream. And then, as the first drops of rain hit the verandah steps, and the scent of the freshened earth passed through the house, he would start roaring again, like a drunk. The wind swept the rain into his spacious cage, and Harold would spread out his wings and dance, tumbling about like a circus clown.

When the monsoon really set in, he would get used to the rains, and his enthusiasm, like our own, would lessen.

But the first few showers were always a wonder to him and we would come out on the verandah to watch him and share in his pleasure.

I miss Harold's raucous bark, and the banging of his great bill. If there is a heaven for good hornbills, I hope he is getting all the summer showers he could wish for, and plenty of tennis balls to catch.

A Little World of Mud

I had never thought there was much to be found in the rain-water pond behind our house except for quantities of mud and the occasional water-buffalo. It was Grandfather who introduced me to the pond's diversity of life, so beautifully arranged that each individual gained some benefit from the well-being of the mass. To the inhabitants of the pond, the pond was the world; and to the inhabitants of the world, commented Grandfather, the world was but a muddy pond.

When Grandfather first showed me the pond-world, he chose a dry place in the shade of an old peepul tree, where we sat for an hour, gazing steadily at the thin green scum on the water. The buffaloes had not arrived for their afternoon dip, and the surface of the pond was undisturbed.

For the first ten minutes we saw nothing. Then a small black blob appeared in the middle of the pond. Gradually it rose higher until at last we could make out a frog's head, its big eyes staring hard at us. He did not know if we were friend or enemy, and kept his body out of sight.

A heron, his mortal enemy, might have been wading about in search of him. When he had made sure that we were not herons, he passed this information on to his friends and neighbours, and very soon there were a number of big heads and eyes on the surface of the water. Throats swelled, and there began a chorus which went, "*wurk, wurk, wurk...*"

In the shallow water near the tree we could see a dark shifting shadow. When we touched it with the end of a stick, the dark mass immediately became alive. Thousands of little black tadpoles wriggled into life, pushing and hustling one another.

"What do tadpoles eat?" I asked Grandfather.

"They eat one another much of the time," said Grandfather, who had once kept a few in an aquarium. "It may seem an unpleasant custom, but when you think of the thousands of tadpoles that are hatched, you will realise what a useful system it is. If all the young tadpoles in this pond became frogs, they would take up every inch of ground between us and the house!"

"Their croaking would certainly drive Grandmother crazy," I said, to which Grandfather agreed.

When Grandfather was younger, he had once brought home a number of green tree-frogs. He put them in a glass-jar and left them on a window-sill without telling anyone, anyone at all, of their presence.

At about four in the morning the entire household was awakened by a loud and fearful noise, and Grandmother and several nervous relatives gathered on the verandah for safety. Their fear turned to anger when they discov-



ered the source of the noise. At the first glimmer of dawn, the frogs had with one accord burst into song. Grandmother wanted to throw the frogs, bottle and all, out of the window, but Grandfather gave the bottle a good shaking, and the frogs stayed quiet. Everyone went to sleep again, but Grandfather was obliged to stay awake in order to shake the bottle whenever the frogs showed signs of bursting into song again.

Fortunately for all concerned, the next day Aunt Mabel took the top off the bottle to see what was inside. The sight of a dozen green tree-frogs so frightened her that she ran off without replacing the cover, and the frogs jumped out and got loose in the garden and were never seen again.

Their escape ruined Grandfather's project of using the tree-frogs as barometers. His idea was to place the frogs in tall bottles with wooden ladders. The steps of the ladder would act as degree-marks. The frogs would climb to the top in fine weather, but keep to the bottom of the bottle in bad weather. It was Grandfather's plan to consult his frogs before going out on picnics.

But to return to my own pond....

I soon grew into the habit of visiting it on my own, to explore its banks and shallows; and, taking off my shoes, I would wade into the muddy water up to my knees, and pluck the water-lilies off the surface.

One day, when I reached the pond, I found it already occupied by the buffaloes. Their owner, a boy a little older than I, was swimming about in the middle of the pond. Instead of climbing out on to the bank, he would

pull himself up on the back of one of his buffaloes, stretch his naked brown body out on the animal's glistening back, and start singing to himself.

When the boy saw me staring at him from across the pond, he smiled, showing gleaming white teeth in his dark, sun-burned face. He invited me to join him in a swim. I told him I could not swim, and he offered to teach me. He dived off the back of his buffalo and swam across to me. And I, having removed my shirt and shorts, followed his instructions until I was struggling about among the water-lilies.

The boy's name was Ramu, and he promised to give me swimming lessons every afternoon. And so it was during the afternoons — especially summer afternoons when everyone else was asleep — that we met.

Very soon I was able to swim across the pond to sit with Ramu astride a contented buffalo, standing like an island in the middle of a muddy ocean. Ramu came from a family of farmers and had as yet received no schooling. But he was well-versed in folk-lore and knew a great deal about birds and animals.

I liked the buffaloes too. Sometimes we would try racing them, Ramu and I riding on different buffaloes. But they were lazy creatures, and would leave one comfortable spot only to look for another or, if they were in no mood for games, would roll over on their backs, taking us with them into the mud and green scum of the pond. I would often emerge from the pond in shades of green and khaki, then slip into the house through the bathroom, bathing under the tap before getting into

my clothes.

Ramu and I sat on our favourite buffalo and watched a pair of sarus-cranes prancing and capering around each other: tall, stork-like birds with naked red heads and long red legs. They are always very devoted companions, and it is said that if a sarus is killed its mate will haunt the scene for weeks, calling sadly, and sometimes pining away and dying of grief. They are held in great affection by village people, and when caught young make excellent pets. Though Grandfather did not keep a sarus-crane, he said they were as good as watch-dogs, giving loud trumpet-like calls when they were disturbed.

"Many birds are sacred," said Ramu, as a blue-jay swooped down from the peepul tree and carried off a grasshopper. He told me that both the blue-jay and Lord Shiva were called *Nilkanth*. Shiva had a blue throat, like the bird, because out of compassion for the human race, He had swallowed a deadly poison meant to destroy the world. Keeping the poison in His throat, He did not let it go down any farther.

"Are squirrels sacred?" I asked.

"Lord Krishna loved squirrels," said Ramu. "He would take them in His arms and stroke them with His long fingers. That is why they have four dark lines down their backs from head to tail. Krishna was very dark, and the lines are the marks of His fingers."

It seemed that both Ramu and Grandfather were of the opinion that we should be more gentle with birds and animals, and not kill so many of them.

"It is also important that we respect them," said Grand-

father. "We must acknowledge their rights on the earth. Everywhere, birds and animals are finding it more difficult to live because we are destroying their forests. They have to keep moving as the trees disappear."

Ramu and I spent many long summer afternoons at the pond. Only the buffaloes and the frogs and the sarus-cranes knew of our friendship. They had accepted us as part of their own world, their muddy but comfortable pond. And when finally I went away, both they and Ramu must have assumed that I would return like the birds.

The Banyan Tree

Though the house and grounds belonged to my grandparents, the magnificent old banyan tree was mine — chiefly because Grandfather, at sixty-five, could no longer climb it.

Its spreading branches, which hung to the ground and took root again, forming a number of twisting passages, gave me endless pleasure. Among them were squirrels and snails and butterflies. The tree was older than the house, older than Grandfather, as old as Dehra Dun itself. I could hide myself in its branches, behind thick green leaves, and spy on the world below.

My first friend was a small grey squirrel. Arching his back and sniffing into the air, he seemed at first to resent my invasion of his privacy. But when he found that I did not arm myself with catapult or air-gun, he became friendly, and when I started bringing him pieces of cake and biscuit, he grew quite bold and was soon taking morsels from my hand.

Before long he was delving into my pockets and helping himself to whatever he could find. He was a very

young squirrel, and his friends and relatives probably thought him foolish and headstrong for trusting a human.

In the spring, when the banyan tree was full of small red figs, birds of all kinds would flock into its branches: the red-bottomed bulbul, cheerful and greedy; gossipy rosy-pastors; parrots, mynas and crows squabbling with one another. During the fig season, the banyan tree was the noisiest place in the garden.

Half way up the tree I had built a crude platform where I would spend the afternoons when it was not too hot. I could read there, propping myself up against the bole of the tree with a cushion from the living-room. *Treasure Island*, *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Story of Dr. Dolittle* were some of the books that made up my banyan tree library.

When I did not feel like reading, I could look down through the leaves at the world below. And on one particular afternoon I had a grand-stand view of that classic of the Indian wilds, a fight between a mongoose and a cobra. And this one had not been staged for my benefit!

The warm breezes of approaching summer had sent everyone, including the gardener, into the house. I was feeling drowsy myself, wondering if I should go to the pond and have a swim with Ramu and the buffaloes, when I saw a huge black cobra gliding out of a clump of cactus. At the same time a mongoose emerged from the bushes and went straight for the cobra.

In a clearing beneath the banyan tree, in bright sunshine, they came face to face.

The cobra knew only too well that the grey mongoose,

three feet long, was a superb fighter, clever and aggressive. But the cobra, too, was a skilful and experienced fighter. He could move swiftly and strike with the speed of light; and the sacks behind his long sharp fangs were full of deadly poison.

It was to be a battle of champions.

Hissing defiance, his forked tongue darting in and out, the cobra raised three of his six feet off the ground, and spread his broad, spectacled hood. The mongoose bushed his tail. The long hair on his spine stood up.

Though the combatants were unaware of my presence in the tree, they were soon made aware of the arrival of two other spectators. One was a myna, the other a jungle crow. They had seen these preparations for battle, and had settled on the cactus to watch the outcome. Had they been content only to watch, all would have been well with both of them.

The cobra stood on the defensive, swaying slowly from side to side, trying to mesmerise the mongoose into making a false move. But the mongoose knew the power of his opponent's glassy, unwinking eyes, and refused to meet them. Instead he fixed his gaze at a point just below the cobra's hood, and opened the attack.

Moving forward quickly until he was just within the cobra's reach, the mongoose made a pretended move to one side. Immediately the cobra struck. His great hood came down so swiftly that I thought nothing could save the mongoose. But the little fellow jumped neatly to one side, and darted in as swiftly as the cobra, biting the snake on the back and darting away again out of reach.

At the same moment that the cobra struck, the crow and the myna hurled themselves at him, only to collide heavily in mid-air. Shrieking insults at each other, they returned to the cactus plant.

A few drops of blood glistened on the cobra's back.

The cobra struck again and missed. Again the mongoose sprang aside, jumped in and bit. Again the birds dived at the snake, bumped into each other instead, and returned shrieking to the safety of the cactus.

The third round followed the same course as the first but with one dramatic difference. The crow and the myna, still determined to take part in the proceedings, dived at the cobra; but this time they missed each other as well as their mark. The myna flew on and reached its perch, but the crow tried to pull up in mid-air and turn back. In the second that it took the bird to do this, the cobra whipped his head back and struck with great force, his snout thudding against the crow's body.

I saw the bird flung nearly twenty feet across the garden. It fluttered about for a while, then lay still. The myna remained on the cactus plant, and when the snake and the mongoose returned to the fight, very wisely decided not to interfere again!

The cobra was weakening, and the mongoose, walking fearlessly up to it, raised himself on his short legs and with a lightning snap had the big snake by the snout. The cobra writhed and lashed about in a frightening manner, and even coiled itself about the mongoose, but to no avail. The little fellow hung grimly on, until the snake had ceased to struggle. He then smelt along its quivering

length, gripped it round the hood, and dragged it into the bushes.

The myna dropped cautiously to the ground, hopped about, peered into the bushes from a safe distance, and then, with a shrill cry of congratulation, flew away.

The banyan tree was also the setting for what we were to call the Strange Case of the Grey Squirrel and the White Rat.

The white rat was Grandfather's — he had bought it for one-quarter of a rupee — but I would often take it with me into the banyan tree, where it soon struck up a friendship with one of the squirrels. They would go off together on little excursions among the roots and branches of the old tree.

Then the squirrel started building a nest. At first she tried building it in my pockets, and when I went indoors and took off my clothes I would find straw and grass falling out.

Then one day Grandmother's knitting was missing. We hunted for it everywhere but without success.

The next day I saw something glinting in a hole in the banyan tree. Going up to investigate, I saw that it was the end of Grandmother's steel knitting-needle. On looking further, I discovered that the hole was crammed with knitting. Amongst the wool were three baby squirrels — and all of them were white!

We gazed at the white squirrels in wonder and fascination. Grandfather was puzzled at first, but when I told him about the white rat's visits to the tree, his brow cleared. He said the white rat must be the father.

A Crow in the House

The young crow had fallen from its nest and was fluttering about on the road, in danger of being crushed by a cart or a tonga, or seized by a cat, when I picked it up and brought it home. It was in a sorry condition, beak gaping and head dropping, and we did not expect it to live. But Grandfather and I did our best to bring it round. We fed it by prising its beak gently open with a pencil, pushing in a little bread and milk, and then removing the pencil to allow it to swallow. We varied this diet with occasional doses of Grandmother's home-made plum wine, and as a result the young crow was soon on the road to recovery.

He was offered his freedom but he did not take it. Instead he made himself at home in the house. Grandmother, Aunt Mabel, and even some of Grandfather's pets objected; but there was no way of getting rid of the bird. He took over the administration of the house.

We were not sure that he was male, but we called him Caesar.

Before long, Caesar was joining us at meal times, besides finding his own grubs or beetles in the garden. He

danced about on the dining table and gave us no peace until he had been given his small bowl of meat and soup and vegetables. He was always restless, fidgeting about, investigating things. He would hop across a table to empty a match-box of its contents, or rip the daily paper to shreds, or overturn a vase of flowers, or tug at the tail of one of the dogs.

"That crow will be the ruin of us!" grumbled Grandmother, picking marigolds off the carpet. "Can't you keep him in a cage?"

We did try keeping Caesar in a cage, but he was so angry, and objected with such fierce cawing and flapping, that it was better for our nerves and peace of mind to give him the run of the house. He did not show any inclination to join the other crows in the banyan tree. Grandfather said this was because he was really a jungle crow — a raven of sorts — and probably felt a little contemptuous of very ordinary carrion crows. But it seemed to me that Caesar, having grown used to living with humans on equal terms, had become snobbish and did not wish to mix with his own kind. He would even squabble with Harold the Hornbill. Perching on top of Harold's cage, he would peck at the big bird's feet, whereupon Harold would swear and scold and try to catch Caesar through the bars.

In time, Caesar learnt to talk a little — as ravens sometimes do — in a cracked, throaty voice. He would sit for hours outside the window, banging on the glass with his beak and calling, "*Hello, hello.*" He seemed to recognise the click of the gate when I came home from school, and would come to the door with a hop, skip and jump,

saying, "*Hello, hello!*" I had also taught him to sit on my arm and say "*Kiss, kiss*", while he placed his head gently against my mouth.

On one of Aunt Mabel's visits, Caesar alighted on her arm and cackled, "*Kiss, kiss!*" Aunt Mabel was delighted — and possibly flattered — and leant forward for a kiss. But Caesar's attention shifted to my aunt's gleaming spectacles, and thrusting at them with his beak, he knocked them off. Aunt Mabel never was a success with the pets.

Pet or pest? Grandmother insisted that Caesar was a pest, in spite of his engaging habits. If he had restricted his activities to our own house, it would not have been so bad; but he took to visiting neighbouring houses and stealing pens and pencils, hair-ribbons, combs, keys, shuttlecocks, toothbrushes and false teeth. He was especially fond of toothbrushes, and made a collection of them on top of the cupboard in my room. Most of the neighbours were represented in our house by a toothbrush. Toothbrush sales went up that year. So did Grandmother's blood-pressure.

Caesar spied on children going into the *bania's* shop, and often managed to snatch sweets from them as they came out. Clothes pegs fascinated him. Neighbours would return from the bazar to find their washing lying in the mud, and no sign of the pegs. These, too, found their way to the top of my cupboard.

It was Caesar's gardening activities that finally led to disaster. He was helping himself to our neighbour's beans when a stick was flung at him, breaking his leg. I

carried the unfortunate bird home, and Grandfather and I washed and bandaged his leg as best we could. But it would not mend. Caesar hung his head and no longer talked. He grew weaker day by day, refusing to eat. An occasional sip of Grandmother's home-made wine was all that kept him going.

One morning I found him dead on the sofa, his legs stiff in the air. Poor Caesar! His anti-social habits had led to his early end.

I dug a shallow grave in the garden, and buried him there, along with all the toothbrushes and clothes pegs he had taken so much trouble to collect.

Henry: a Chameleon

This is the story of Henry, our pet chameleon. Chameleons are in a class by themselves, and are no ordinary reptiles. From their nearest relatives, the lizards, they are easily distinguished by certain outstanding marks. A chameleon's tongue is as long as its body. On its head is a rigid crest which looks like a fireman's helmet. His limbs are long and slender, and his fingers and toes are more developed than those of other reptiles.

Henry's most remarkable characteristics were his eyes. They were not beautiful. But his left eye was quite independent of his right. He could move one eye without disturbing the other. This gave him a horrible squint. Each eye-ball, raised out of his head, was wobbled up and down, backwards and forwards, quite independently of its partner. Reptiles are not gifted like us with binocular vision. They do not see an object with both eyes at once.

Whenever I visited Henry, he would treat me with great caution, sitting perfectly still on his perch with his back to me. But his nearest eye would move round like the beam of a searchlight until it had got me well in focus.

Then it would stop, and the other eye would proceed to carry out an independent survey of its own in some different direction. Henry took nobody on trust, and treated my friendliest gestures with grave suspicion.

Tiring of his attitude, I would tickle him gently in the ribs with my finger. This always threw him into a great rage. He would blow himself up to an enormous size, his lungs filling his body with air. He would sit up on his hind legs, swaying from side to side, hoping to overawe me. Opening his mouth very wide, he would let out an angry hiss. But his protests went no further. He did not bite. Non-violence was his creed.

Many people believe the chameleon is a dangerous and poisonous reptile. When Grandfather was visiting a friend in the country, he came upon a noisy scene at the garden gate. Men were shouting, hurling stones and brandishing sticks. The cause of all this was a chameleon who had been discovered sunning himself on a shrub. The gardener declared that it was a thing capable of poisoning people at a distance of twenty feet, and as a result the entire household had risen in arms. Grandfather was in time to save the chameleon from certain death, and brought the little reptile home.

That chameleon was Henry and that was how he came to live with us.

Henry was a harmless creature. If I put my finger in his mouth even in his wildest moments he would simply wait for me to take it out again. I suppose he could bite. His rigid jaws carried a number of fine pointed teeth. But Henry was rightly convinced that these were given to him

solely for the purpose of chewing his food.

Provided I was patient, Henry was willing to take food from my hands. This he did very swiftly. His tongue was a sort of boomerang which came back to him with the food, an insect victim, attached to it. Before I could realise what had happened, the grasshopper held between my fingers would be lodged between Henry's jaws.

Henry did not cause any trouble in our house, but he did create something like a riot in the nursery school down the road.

It happened like this.

When the papayas in our garden were ripe, Grandmother usually sent a basket of them to her friend, Mrs. Ghosh, who was the principal of the nursery school. On this occasion, Henry managed to smuggle himself into the basket of papayas when no one was looking. (He did have a cage of his own, but was seldom in it.) The gardener dutifully carried the papayas across to the school and left them in Mrs. Ghosh's office. When Mrs. Ghosh came in after making her rounds, she began admiring and examining the papayas. Out popped Henry.

Mrs. Ghosh screamed. Henry would probably have liked to blush a deep red, but he turned a bright green instead, as that was the colour of the papayas. Mrs. Ghosh's assistant, Miss Daniels, rushed in, took one look at the chameleon, and joined in the screaming. Henry took fright and fled from the office, running down the corridor and into one of the classrooms. There he climbed on to a desk, while children ran in all directions, some to get away from Henry, some to catch him. But

Henry made his exit from a window, and disappeared in the garden.

Grandmother heard all about the incident from Mrs. Ghosh, but did not tell her the chameleon was ours. I did not think Henry would find his way back to us, because the school was three houses away. But three days later, I found him sunning himself on the garden wall. He readily accepted some food from my hand, and allowed himself to be recaptured.

A Week in the Jungle

Grandfather never hunted wild animals, he couldn't understand the pleasure some people obtained from killing the creatures of our forests. Birds and animals, he felt, had as much right to live as humans. We could kill them for food, he said, because even animals killed for food; but not for pleasure.

At the age of twelve I did not have the same high principles as Grandfather. Nevertheless, I disliked shooting. I found it boring.

Uncle Henry and some of his sporting friends once took me on a shikar expedition into the Terai jungles in the Siwaliks. The prospect of a week in the jungle, as camp-follower to several adults with guns, filled me with dismay. I knew that long, weary hours would be spent tramping behind these tall, professional-looking hunters who spoke in terms of bagging this tiger or that wild elephant, when all they ever got, if they were lucky, was a wild hare or a partridge. Tigers and excitement, it seemed, came only to Jim Corbett.

This particular expedition proved to be no different

from others. There were four men with guns, and at the end of the week all that they had shot were two miserable, underweight wild fowl. But I managed, on our second day in the jungle, to be left behind in the rest-house. And, in the course of a morning's exploration of the old bungalow, I discovered a shelf of books half-hidden in a corner of the back verandah.

Who had left them there? A literary forest officer? A *memsahib* who had been bored by her husband's camp-fire boasting? Or someone who had no interest in the "manly" sport of slaughtering wild animals and had brought his library along to pass the time? He must have left it behind for others like him.

Or possibly the poor fellow had gone into the jungle one day, as a gesture to his more blood-thirsty companions, and been trampled by an elephant, or gored by a wild boar, or (more likely) accidentally shot by one of the shikaris — and his sorrowing friends had taken his remains away and left his books behind.

Anyway, there they were — a shelf of some thirty volumes, in different shapes, sizes and colours. I wiped the thick dust off the covers and examined the titles. As my reading tastes had not yet formed, I was willing to try anything. The bookshelf was varied in its contents — and my own interests have since remained fairly universal.

On that second day in the forest rest-house, I discovered P.G. Wodehouse and read his *Love Among the Chickens*, an early Ukridge story and still one of my favourites. By the time the perspiring hunters came home in the evening, with their spent cartridges and impressive

excuses, I had made a start with M.R. James' *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*. This kept me awake most of the night, until the oil in the kerosene lamp was exhausted.

Next morning, fresh and optimistic again, the shikaris set out for a different area, where they hoped to get a tiger. They had employed a party of villagers to beat the jungle, and all day I could hear the tom-toms throbbing in the distance. This did not prevent me from finishing M.R. James, or discovering a little book called *A Naturalist on the Prowl* by 'EHA'. It described the tremendous fun and interest to be had from studying the wild life in one's own back garden — the grasshoppers, beetles, ants, butterflies and praying-mantises, all living such fascinating lives just outside (and sometimes inside) our bedroom windows.

Before I had finished the book, I was looking for spiders in the corners of the old bungalow and stalking grasshoppers in the long grass of the compound. My concentration was disturbed only once, when I looked up and saw a spotted deer crossing the open space in front of the house. The deer disappeared among the *sal* trees, and I returned to the verandah and my book.

Dusk had fallen when I heard the party returning from the hunt. The hunters were talking loudly and seemed excited. Perhaps they had got their tiger. I put down my book and came out of the house to meet them.

"Did you get the tiger?" I asked excitedly.

"No, laddie," said Uncle Henry. "I think we'll get it tomorrow. But you should have been with us — we saw a spotted deer!"

There were three days left, and I knew I would never get through the entire bookshelf. This I did not intend doing, as not all the authors on the shelf appealed to me. I chose at random *The Wind in the Willows*, *The Jungle Book* and *David Copperfield*.

On the day I made the literary acquaintance of Mowgli, the wolf-boy, the shikaris shot the two wild fowl already mentioned. As the party had from the first intended living off the jungle, only some tinned foods had been brought along; but two lean birds were insufficient for a party of five, and once again the meal consisted mostly of corned meat and mustard.

Next day, while the grown-ups were looking for their tiger and I was learning wisdom from the Water Rat, Toad and other river people of *The Wind in the Willows*, an event took place which disturbed my reading for a little while.

I had noticed, on the previous day, that a number of stray mongrels — belonging to watchmen, villagers and forest-guards — always hung about the house, waiting for scraps of food to be thrown away. It was ten o'clock in the morning (a time when wild animals seldom come into the open), when I heard a sudden yelp in the clearing. Looking up, I saw a full-grown panther making off into the jungle with one of the dogs held in its mouth. The panther had either been driven towards the house by the beaters, or had watched the party leave the bungalow and decided to help itself to a meal.

There was no one else about at the time. Since the dog was obviously dead within seconds of being seized, and the panther had disappeared, I saw no point in raising

an alarm but returned to my book.

It was getting late when the shikaris returned. They were dirty, sweaty, and, as usual, disappointed. This time their excuses held a note of defiance. They took their corned meat in silence. Next day we were to return to "civilization," and none of the hunters had anything to show for a week in the jungles of India.

"No game left in these jungles," said the leading member of the party, famed for once having shot two man-eating tigers and a basking crocodile in rapid succession.

"It's the weather," said another. "No rain at all this winter."

"Don't know what the country's coming to," grumbled the third.

"I saw a panther this morning," I said modestly.

In fact, I was altogether too modest. I might just as well have said, "I saw a donkey this morning," for all the impression I made.

"Did you really?" said the leading hunter. He glanced at the book lying beside me. "Young Master Copperfield says he saw a panther!"

The others were only faintly amused. They did not have the energy to laugh.

"Too imaginative for his age," said one of them. "Comes from reading so much, I suppose."

"If you were to get out of the house and into the jungle a little," said Uncle Henry reproachfully, "you might really see a panther."

"Don't know what young fellows are coming to these days..."

“Why didn’t you grab it, man, and take it to Grandfather?” And everyone laughed.

I went to bed early and left them to their tales of the “good old days” when rhinos, cheetahs and possibly even the legendary phoenix were still available for slaughter.

I came home with a poor reputation. My uncle’s friends thought I was both a sissy and a liar. And Uncle Henry, poor man, seemed to think I was responsible for the failure of the entire expedition. He did not take me with him again. But Grandfather, when I told him all about the hunt, doubled up with laughter and said he wished he had been with us, if only to see the faces of Uncle Henry and his friends. As a measure of his delight, he bought me a copy of *David Copperfield*, for I had not been able to finish the one in the forest rest-house. I finally got through it in the banyan tree, in the company of several squirrels and a very noisy cicada.

A Photograph

Grandmother sat in a rocking-chair, under the mango tree. It was late summer and there were sunflowers in the garden and a warm wind in the trees. Grandmother was knitting me a pullover for the winter months. Her hair was white, her eyes were not very strong, but her fingers moved quickly with the needles, and the needles kept clicking all afternoon. Grandmother was old, but there were very few wrinkles on her skin.

In some of my tales I have perhaps been guilty of writing more admiringly of Grandfather than of Grandmother. It’s true that Grandfather and I had much in common, and that he gave me more of his time; but then, he had more time to give. He was a retired gentleman. But housewives never retire. And Grandmother always had housework. She saw to our meals, she did the shopping, kept the household accounts, and dealt with a variety of tradesmen including the butcher, the baker, the *dhobi*, and various egg, fruit, vegetable and charcoal vendors.

And so, if our pets sometimes hindered her in the

efficient running of the house, who can blame her for being a little short with us at times?

In the long run, though Grandmother grumbled, she always tolerated most of our pets. She nursed Toto the monkey when he was sick; she was fond of the Hornbill; in fact, she liked all birds. She kept her own bird-bath in the garden, where mynas, thrushes, bulbuls and flower-peckers would come for a dip or a drink, and she never forgot to fill the stone bath with fresh water in the mornings.

When she did find time to relax in her rocking-chair, she liked having me beside her, and she liked talking about her youth.

One afternoon, after lunch (or tiffin, as we called it then), I was rummaging in a box of old books and family heirlooms that I had found in the box room. There was not much to interest me except a book on butterflies, and as I was going through it I found a small photograph in between the pages. It was a faded picture, a little yellow and foggy — a picture of a girl standing against a wall; and from the other side of the wall a pair of hands reached up, as though someone were about to climb over it. There were flowers growing near the girl, but I could not tell what they were; there was a small tree, too, but it was just a tree to me.

I ran out into the garden.

“Granny!” I shouted. “Look at this picture! I found it in that box of old things. Whose picture is it?”

I raised myself on the arm of the rocking-chair, and we nearly toppled over into a bed of nasturtiums.

“Now look what you’ve gone and done,” said Grandmother. “I’ve lost count of my stitches. The next time you jump up like that, I’ll make you finish the pullover yourself.”

Grandmother was always threatening to teach me how to knit. She said it would take my mind off unhealthy creatures like frogs and lizards and buffaloes. Once, when Toto tore the drawing room curtains, she put a needle and thread in my hand and made me stitch the curtain together, even though I made long, two-inch stitches which had to be taken out by Grandmother and done all over again.

She took the photograph from my hand, and we both stared at it for quite some time. The girl had long, loose hair, and she wore a long dress that nearly covered her ankles, and sleeves that reached her wrists; but, in spite of all this drapery, the girl appeared to be full of freedom and movement; she stood with her legs apart and her hands on her hips, and she had a wide, almost devilish smile on her face.

“Whose picture is it?” I asked.

“A little girl’s, of course,” said Grandmother. “Can’t you tell?”

“Yes, but did you know her?”

“Oh yes, I knew her,” said Grandmother. “But she was a wicked little girl, and I shouldn’t tell you about her. I’ll tell you about the photograph. It was taken in our home, oh many many years ago, and that’s the garden wall, and over the wall there was a road leading to town. That girl used to sneak over the wall sometimes, and visit the bazar.

She couldn't resist *jilebis*. Do you like *jilebis*?"

"Yes, very much! But whose hands are they?" I asked. "Coming up from the other side?"

Grandmother squinted and looked closely at the picture, shaking her head. "It's the first time I've noticed," she said. "They must have been a child's, another child's."

"Were they Grandfather's? Didn't he climb over the wall, afterwards?"

"No, nobody climbed up. At least, I don't remember."

"And you remember well, Granny."

"Yes, I remember ... I remember what is not in the photograph. It was a spring day, and there was a cool breeze blowing. Those flowers at the girl's feet, they were marigolds, and the bougainvillea creeper was a mass of purple. You can't see those colours in the photo, and even if you could, you wouldn't be able to smell the flowers or feel the breeze."

"And what about the girl?" I asked. "Tell me about the girl."

"Well, she was a wicked girl," said Grandmother. "You don't know the trouble her mother had getting her into those fine clothes she's wearing."

"They're terrible clothes," I said.

"She thought so, too. Most of the time she hardly wore a thing. Dehra Dun summers were as hot then as they are now. She used to go swimming in the canal. The neighbours were shocked. Boys never teased her, because she didn't hesitate to fight them!"

"She looks tough," I said. "You can tell by the way she's

smiling. At any moment something's going to happen."

"Something *did* happen," said Grandmother. "Her mother wouldn't let her get out of those awful clothes, so she jumped into the canal fully clothed!"

I burst into laughter, and Grandmother joined in.

"Who was the girl?" I asked. "You must tell me who she was."

"No, that wouldn't do," said Grandmother. "I won't tell you."

I knew the girl in the photograph was really Grandmother, but I pretended not to know. I knew, because Grandmother still smiled in the same way.

"Come on, Granny," I said. "Tell me, tell me."

But Grandmother shook her head and carried on with her knitting; and I held the photograph in my hands, looking from it to my grandmother and back again, trying to find points in common between the old lady and the little pigtailed girl. A lemon-coloured butterfly settled on the end of Grandmother's knitting-needle, and stayed there while the needle clicked away. I made a grab at the butterfly, and it flew off in a dipping flight and settled on a sunflower.

"I wonder whose hands they were," whispered Grandmother to herself, with her head bowed in memory, and her needles clicking away in the soft, warm silence of that summer afternoon.

All this was many years ago.

When my parents returned to India, I left my grandparents' house and went to live in Saurashtra.

Grandfather and I corresponded regularly, and he kept me informed of his pets and any new additions to his zoo.

I often think about his birds and animals, the inhabitants of the banyan tree, and the residents of the pond behind the old house. And I remember Ramu the village boy, and the fun we had with the buffaloes. And I wish that I might see them again.

And perhaps one day when I have made some money I will go back to Dehra Dun and buy back Grandfather's old house and start another zoo of my own.

The Road to the Bazaar

The Tunnel

It was almost noon, and the jungle was very still, very silent. Heat waves shimmered along the railway embankment where it cut a path through the tall evergreen trees. The railway lines were two straight black serpents disappearing into the tunnel in the hillside.

Suraj stood near the cutting, waiting for the midday train. It wasn't a station, and he wasn't catching a train. He was waiting so that he could watch the steam-engine come roaring out of the tunnel.

He had cycled out of Dehra and taken the jungle path until he had come to a small village. He had left the cycle there, and walked over a low, scrub-covered hill and down to the tunnel exit.

Now he looked up. He had heard, in the distance, the shrill whistle of the engine. He couldn't see anything, because the train was approaching from the other side of the hill; but presently a sound like distant thunder issued from the tunnel, and he knew the train was coming through.

A second or two later, the steam-engine shot out of the

tunnel, snorting and puffing like some green, black and gold dragon, some beautiful monster out of Suraj's dreams. Showering sparks left and right, it roared a challenge to the jungle.

Instinctively, Suraj stepped back a few paces. Waves of hot steam struck him in the face. Even the trees seemed to flinch from the noise and heat. And then the train had gone, leaving only a plume of smoke to drift lazily over the tall Shisham trees.

The jungle was still again. No one moved.

Suraj turned from his contemplation of the drifting smoke and began walking along the embankment towards the tunnel.

The tunnel grew darker as he walked further into it. When he had gone about twenty yards it became pitch black. Suraj had to turn and look back at the opening to reassure himself that there was still daylight outside. Ahead of him, the tunnel's other opening was just a small round circle of light.

The tunnel was still full of smoke from the train, but it would be several hours before another train came through. Till then, the cutting belonged to the jungle again.

Suraj didn't stop, because there was nothing to do in the tunnel and nothing to see. He had simply wanted to walk through, so that he would know what the inside of a tunnel was really like. The walls were damp and sticky. A bat flew past. A lizard scuttled between the lines.

Coming straight from the darkness into the light, Suraj was dazzled by the sudden glare and put a hand up to

shade his eyes. He looked up at the tree-covered hillside and thought he saw something moving between the trees.

It was just a flash of orange and gold, and a long swishing tail. It was there between the trees for a second or two, and then it was gone.

About fifteen metres from the entrance to the tunnel stood the watchman's hut. Marigolds grew in front of the hut, and at the back there was a small vegetable patch. It was the watchman's duty to inspect the tunnel and keep it clear of obstacles. Every day, before the train came through, he would walk the length of the tunnel. If all was well, he would return to his hut and take a nap. If something was wrong, he would walk back up the line and wave a red flag and the engine-driver would slow down. At night, the watchman lit an oil-lamp and made a similar inspection of the tunnel. Of course, he would not stop the train if there was a porcupine on the line. But if there was any danger to the train, he'd go back up the line and wave his lamp to the approaching engine. If all was well, he'd hang his lamp at the door of his hut and go to sleep.

He was just settling down on his cot for an afternoon nap when he saw the boy emerge from the tunnel. He waited until Suraj was only a metre or so away and then said: "Welcome, welcome. I don't often have visitors. Sit down for a while, and tell me why you were inspecting my tunnel."

"Is it your tunnel?" asked Suraj.

"It is," said the watchman. "It is truly my tunnel, since no one else will have anything to do with it. I have only lent it to the Government."

Suraj sat down on the edge of the cot.

"I wanted to see the train come through," he said. "And then, when it had gone, I thought I'd walk through the tunnel."

"And what did you find in it?"

"Nothing. It was very dark. But when I came out, I thought I saw an animal — up on the hill — but I'm not sure, it moved off very quickly."

"It was a leopard you saw," said the watchman. "My leopard."

"Do you own a leopard too?"

"I do."

"And do you lend it to the Government?"

"I do not."

"Is it dangerous?"

"No, it's a leopard that minds its own business. It comes to this range for a few days every month."

"Have you been here a long time?" asked Suraj.

"Many years. My name is Sunder Singh."

"My name's Suraj."

"There is one train during the day. And there is one train during the night. Have you seen the night-mail come through the tunnel?"

"No. At what time does it come?"

"About nine o'clock, if it isn't late. You could come and sit here with me, if you like. And after it has gone, instead of going to sleep I will take you home."

"I'll ask my parents," said Suraj. "Will it be safe?"

"Of course. It is safer in the jungle than in the town. Nothing happens to me out here. But last month, when I went into town, I was almost run over by a bus."

Sunder Singh yawned and stretched himself out on the cot. "And now I am going to take a nap, my friend. It is too hot to be up and about in the afternoon."

"Everyone goes to sleep in the afternoon," complained Suraj. "My father lies down as soon as he's had his lunch."

"Well, the animals also rest in the heat of the day. It is only the tribe of boys who cannot, or will not, rest."

Sunder Singh placed a large banana-leaf over his face to keep away the flies, and was soon snoring gently. Suraj stood up, looking up and down the railway tracks. Then he began walking back to the village.

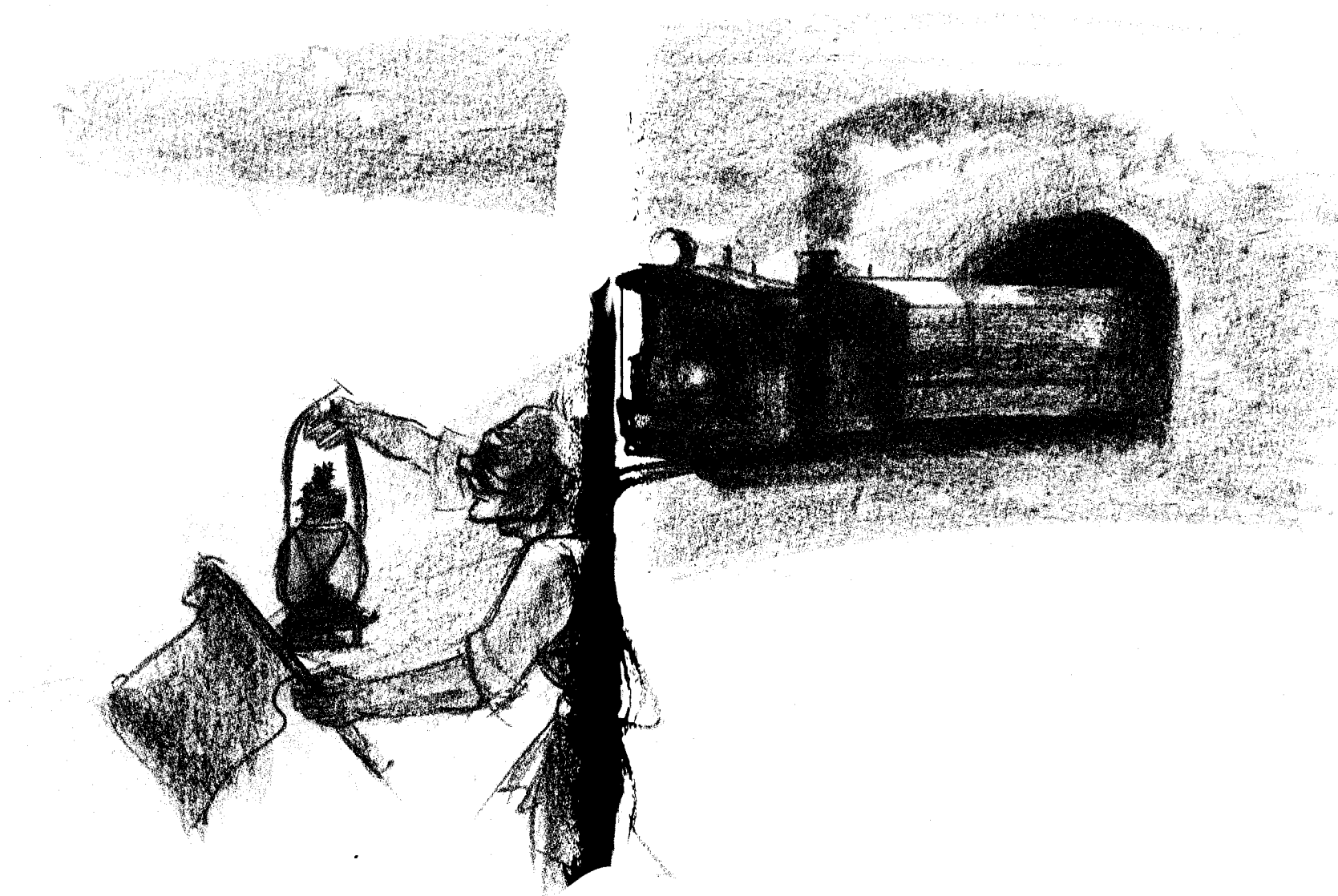
The following evening, towards dusk, as the flying foxes swooped silently out of the trees, Suraj made his way to the watchman's hut.

It had been a long hot day, but now the earth was cooling, and a light breeze was moving through the trees. It carried with it the scent of mango blossoms, the promise of rain.

Sunder Singh was waiting for Suraj. He had watered his small garden, and the flowers looked cool and fresh. A kettle was boiling on a small oil-stove.

"I am making tea," he said. "There is nothing like a glass of hot tea while waiting for a train."

They drank their tea, listening to the sharp notes of the tailor-bird and the noisy chatter of the seven-sisters.



As the brief twilight faded, most of the birds fell silent. Sunder Singh lit his oil-lamp and said it was time for him to inspect the tunnel. He moved off towards the tunnel, while Suraj sat on the cot, sipping his tea. In the dark, the trees seemed to move closer to him. And the night-life of the forest was conveyed on the breeze — the sharp call of a barking deer, the cry of a fox, the quaint *tonk-tonk* of a nightjar. There were some sounds that Suraj didn't recognise — sounds that came from the trees, creakings and whisperings, as though the trees were coming to life, stretching their limbs in the dark, shifting a little, flexing their fingers.

Sunder Singh stood inside the tunnel, trimming his lamp. The night sounds were familiar to him and he did not give them much thought; but something else — a padded footfall, a rustle of dry leaves — made him stand still for a few seconds, peering into the darkness. Then, humming softly to himself, he returned to where Suraj was waiting. Ten minutes remained for the night-mail to arrive.

As Sunder Singh sat down on the cot beside Suraj, a new sound reached both of them quite distinctly — a rhythmic sawing sound, as of someone cutting through the branch of a tree.

"What's that?" whispered Suraj.

"It's the leopard," said Sunder Singh. "I think it's in the tunnel."

"The train will soon be here," said Suraj.

"Yes, my friend. And if we don't drive the leopard out of the tunnel, it will be run over and killed. I can't let that

happen."

"But won't it attack us if we try to drive it out?" asked Suraj, beginning to share the watchman's concern.

"Not this leopard. It knows me well. We have seen each other many times. It has a weakness for goats and stray dogs, but it will not harm us. Even so, I'll take my axe with me. You stay here, Suraj."

"No, I'm coming with you. It will be better than sitting here alone in the dark!"

"All right, but stay close behind me. And remember, there is nothing to fear."

Raising his lamp, Sunder Singh advanced into the tunnel, shouting at the top of his voice to try and scare away the animal. Suraj followed close behind; but he found he was unable to do any shouting. His throat was quite dry.

They had gone about twenty paces into the tunnel when the light from the lamp fell upon the leopard. It was crouching between the tracks, only five metres away from them. It was not a very big leopard, but it looked lithe and sinewy. Baring its teeth and snarling, it went down on its belly, tail twitching.

Suraj and Sunder Singh both shouted together. Their voices rang through the tunnel. And the leopard, uncertain as to how many terrifying humans were there in the tunnel with him, turned swiftly and disappeared into the darkness.

To make sure that it had gone, Sunder Singh and Suraj walked the length of the tunnel. When they returned to the entrance, the rails were beginning to hum. They knew the train was coming.

Suraj put his hand to one of the rails and felt its tremor. He heard the distant rumble of the train. And then the engine came round the bend, hissing at them, scattering sparks into the darkness, defying the jungle as it roared through the steep sides of the cutting. It charged straight at the tunnel, and into it, thundering past Suraj like the beautiful dragon of his dreams.

And when it had gone, the silence returned and the forest seemed to breathe, to live again. Only the rails still trembled with the passing of the train.

They trembled again to the passing of the same train, almost a week later, when Suraj and his father were both travelling in it.

Suraj's father was scribbling in a notebook, doing his accounts. Suraj sat at an open window staring out at the darkness. His father was going to Delhi on a business trip and had decided to take the boy along. ("I don't know where he gets to, most of the time," he'd complained. "I think it's time he learnt something about my business.")

The night-mail rushed through the forest with its hundreds of passengers. The carriage wheels beat out a steady rhythm on the rails. Tiny flickering lights came and went, as they passed small villages on the fringe of the jungle.

Suraj heard the rumble as the train passed over a small bridge. It was too dark to see the hut near the cutting, but he knew they must be approaching the tunnel. He strained his eyes looking out into the night; and then, just as the engine let out a shrill whistle, Suraj saw the lamp.

He couldn't see Sunder Singh, but he saw the lamp,

and he knew that his friend was out there.

The train went into the tunnel and out again; it left the jungle behind and thundered across the endless plains. Suraj stared out at the darkness, thinking of the lonely cutting in the forest and the watchman with the lamp who would always remain a firefly for those travelling thousands as he lit up the darkness for steam-engines and leopards.

The Big Race

Dawn crept quietly over the sleeping town. Only a cock was aware of it, and crowed. Koki heard a soft tapping on the window-pane, and immediately sat up in bed. She was ten years old. Her hair fell about her shoulders in a disorderly fashion and her dark eyes were slightly ringed, but she was wide awake and listening. The tapping was repeated.

Koki got out of bed and tiptoed across to the window and unlatched it. Ranji was standing outside, looking somewhat disgruntled.

"Come on," he said. "It's nearly time."

Koki put a finger to her lips, for she did not want her parents and grandmother to wake up.

"You go and call Bhim," she whispered. "I'll meet you on the maidaan."

Ranji hurried off in the direction of Bhim's house, and Koki turned from the window and went to the dressing table. She combed her hair carelessly and tied it roughly in a ribbon. She was excited and in a hurry, and had slept in her dress, which was very crushed. Now she was ready

to leave.

Very quietly, she pulled open a dressing-table drawer, and brought out a cardboard box in which were punctured little holes. She opened the lid of the box to see if Rajkumari was all right.

Rajkumari, a dumpy rhino beetle, was asleep on the core of an apple. Koki did not disturb her. She closed the box and, barefoot, crept out of the house through the back door.

As soon as she was outside, Koki broke into a run. She did not stop running until she reached the maidaan.

On the maidaan, the slanting rays of the early morning sun were just beginning to make emeralds of the dew-drops. Later in the day the grass would dry and be prickly to the feet, but now it was cool and soft. A group of boys had gathered at one corner of the maidaan, talking excitedly, and among them were Ranji and Bhim, a lanky, bespectacled boy of fourteen. Koki was the only girl among them.

Bhim's beetle was the favourite for the race. It was a large bamboo beetle, with a slim body and long, slender legs, rather like its master's. It was called 2001. Ranji's beetle was a Stone Carrier with what looked like a very long pair of whiskers. It was appropriately named Moocha (Moustaches). Koki's beetle was not half as big as the other two. Though she did not know how to tell its sex, she was sure it was a female and had called it Rajkumari — Princess.

There were only three entries. Betting wasn't strictly allowed, but the boys made a few quiet bets among them-

selves. The prize was a giant insect (there was some disagreement as to whether it was a beetle or an outsize cockroach), which was meant to enable the winner to breed racing beetles on a larger scale.

There was some confusion when Ranji's Moocha escaped from his box and took a preliminary canter over the grass; but he was soon caught and returned to his enclosure. Moocha appeared to be in good form; in fact, he would be tough competition for Bhim's 2001.

The course was about two metres long, the tracks fifteen centimetres wide. The tracks were fenced with strips of cardboard so that the contestants did not get in each other's way or leave the course altogether. They were held at the starting-post by another piece of cardboard, which would be placed behind them as soon as the race began — just to make sure that no one backed out.

A little Sikh boy in a yellow pyjama-suit was acting as starter, and he kept blowing his whistle for order and attention. When the onlookers saw that the race was about to begin, they fell silent. The little Sikh boy then announced the rules of the race: the contestants were not to be touched during the race, or blown at from behind, or enticed forward with bits of food. They could, however, be cheered on as loudly as anyone wished.

Moocha and 2001 were already at the starting-post, but Koki was giving Rajkumari a few words of advice. Rajkumari seemed reluctant to leave her apple-core and needed to be taken forcibly to the starting-post.

There was further delay when Moocha and 2001 got their horns and whiskers entangled. They had to be

separated and calmed down before being placed in their respective tracks. The race was about to start.

Koki knelt on the grass, very quiet and serious, looking from Rajkumari to the finishing-line and back again. Ranji was biting his finger-nails. Bhim's glasses had clouded over, and he had to keep taking them off and wiping them on his shirt. There was a hush amongst the dozen or so spectators.

"Pee-ee-eeep!" The little Sikh boy blew his whistle.

They were off!

Or rather, Moocha and 2001 were off. Rajkumari was still at the starting-post, wondering what had happened to her apple-core.

Everyone was cheering madly, and Ranji was jumping up and down, and Bhim's glasses had been knocked off. Moocha was going at a spanking rate. 2001 wasn't taking a great deal of interest in the proceedings, but he *was* moving, and anything could happen in a race like this.

Koki was on the verge of tears. All the coaching she had given Rajkumari seemed to be of no avail. Her beetle was still looking bewildered and hurt.

"Stop sulking," said Koki. "I won't keep you if you don't try."

Then Moocha stopped suddenly, less than a metre from the finishing-line. He seemed to be having trouble with his whiskers, and kept twitching them this way and that. 2001 was catching up slowly but surely, and both Ranji and Bhim were shouting themselves hoarse. Nobody paid any attention to Rajkumari, who was considered to be out of the race; but Koki was using all her

will-power to get her racer going.

As 2001 approached Moocha, he seemed to sense his rival's trouble, and stopped to find out what was the matter. They could not see each other over the cardboard fence, but otherwise appeared to be communicating very well. Ranji and Bhim were becoming quite frantic in their efforts to rally their faltering steeds, and the cheering on all sides was deafening.

Rajkumari, goaded with rage and frustration at having been deprived of her apple-core, now took it into her head to make a bid for liberty and new pastures, and rushed forward in great style.

Koki shouted with joy, but the others did not notice the new challenge until Rajkumari had drawn level with her conferring rivals. There was a gasp from the crowd as Rajkumari strode across the finishing-line in record time.

Everyone cheered the gallant outsider. Ranji and Bhim very sportingly shook Koki by the hand, congratulating her on Rajkumari's victory. The little Sikh boy in the yellow pyjama-suit blew his whistle for silence and presented Koki with her prize.

Koki gazed in rapture at the new beetle — or was it a cockroach? She stroked its back with her thumb. The insect didn't seem to mind. Then, lest Rajkumari should feel jealous, Koki closed the prize-box and, picking up her victorious beetle, returned her to the apple-core.

The crowd began to break up. Ranji decided that he would trim Moocha's whiskers before the next race, and Bhim thought 2001 was in need of a special diet.

"Just wait till next Sunday," said Ranji. "Then watch my Moocha leave the rest of you standing!"

Bhim said nothing. He looked very thoughtful. There were some new training methods which he was going to try out for next time.

Koki walked home, a cardboard box under each arm. Her thoughts were busy with the future. She would breed beetles (or would they be cockroaches?) until she had a stable of about twenty. Her racers would win every event, both here and in the next town. They might make her famous. Beetle-racing would become a national sport!

Meanwhile, she was happy, and Rajkumari was happy on the apple-core, and the new insect was just being an insect and did not know and did not care about anything except how to get out of that wretched box.

Ranji's Wonderful Bat

"How's that!" shouted the wicket-keeper, holding the ball up in his gloves.

"How's that!" echoed the slip-fielders.

"How?" growled the fast bowler, glaring at the umpire.

"Out!" said the umpire.

And Suraj, the captain of the school team, was walking slowly back to the 'pavilion' — which was really a tool-shed at the end of the field.

The score stood at 53 for 4 wickets. Another sixty runs had to be made for victory, and only one good batsman remained. All the rest were bowlers who couldn't be expected to make many runs.

It was Ranji's turn to bat.

He was the youngest member of the team, only eleven, but sturdy and full of pluck. As he walked briskly to the wicket, his unruly black hair was blown about by a cool breeze that came down from the hills.

Ranji had a good eye and strong wrists, and had made lots of runs in some of the minor matches. But in the last two inter-school games his scores had been poor, the

highest being 12 runs. Now he was determined to make enough runs to take his side to victory.

Ranji took his guard and prepared to face the bowler. The fielders moved closer, in anticipation of another catch. The tall fast bowler scowled and began his long run. His arm whirled over, and the hard shiny red ball came hurtling towards Ranji.

Ranji was going to lunge forward and play the ball back to the bowler, but at the last moment he changed his mind and stepped back, intending to push the ball through the ring of fielders on his right or 'off' side. The ball swung in the air, shot off the grass and came through sharply to strike Ranji on his pads.

"How's that!" screamed the bowler, hopping about like a kangaroo.

"How!" shouted the wicket-keeper.

"How?" asked all the fielders.

The umpire slowly raised a finger.

"Out," he said.

And it was Ranji's turn to walk back to the tool-shed.

The match was won by the visiting team.

"Never mind," said Suraj, patting Ranji on the back. "You'll do better next time. You're out of form just now, that's all."

But their cricket coach was sterner.

"You'll have to make more runs in the next game," he told Ranji, "or you'll lose your place in the side!"

Avoiding the other players, Ranji walked slowly home-wards, his head down, his hands in his pockets. He was very upset. He had been trying so hard and practising so

regularly, but when an important game came along he failed to make a big score. It seemed that there was nothing he could do about it. But he loved playing cricket, and he couldn't bear the thought of being out of the school team.

On his way home he had to pass the clock tower where he often stopped at Mr Kumar's Sports Shop, to chat with the owner or look at all the things on the shelves: footballs, cricket balls, badminton rackets, hockey sticks, balls of various shapes and sizes — it was a wonderland where Ranji usually liked to linger.

But this was one day when he didn't feel like stopping. He looked the other way and was about to cross the road when Mr Kumar's voice stopped him.

"Hello, Ranji! Off in a hurry today? And why are you looking so sad?"

So Ranji had to stop and say "namaste". He couldn't ignore Mr Kumar, who had been so kind and helpful, always giving him advice on how to play different kinds of bowling. Mr Kumar had been a state player once, and had scored a century in a match against Tanzania. Now he was too old for first-class cricket, but he liked encouraging young players and he thought Ranji would make a good cricketer.

"What's the trouble?" he asked, as Ranji stepped into the shop. "Lost the game today?"

Ranji felt better as soon as he was inside the shop. Because Mr Kumar was so friendly, the sports goods also seemed friendly. The bats and balls and shuttle-cocks all seemed to want to be helpful.

"We lost the match," said Ranji.

"Never mind," said Mr Kumar. "Where would we be without losers? There wouldn't be any games without them — no cricket or football or hockey or tennis! No carom or marbles. No sports shop for me! Anyway, how many runs did you make?"

"None. I made a big round egg."

Mr Kumar rested his hand on Ranji's shoulder. "Never mind. All good players have a bad day now and then."

"But I haven't made a good score in my last three matches," said Ranji. "I'll be dropped from the team if I don't do something in the next game."

"Well, we can't have that happening," mused Mr Kumar. "Something will have to be done about it."

"I'm just unlucky," said Ranji.

"Maybe, maybe ... But in that case, it's time your luck changed."

"It's too late now," said Ranji.

"Nonsense. It's never too late. Now, you just come with me to the back of my shop and I'll see if I can do something about your luck."

Puzzled, Ranji followed Mr Kumar through the curtained partition at the back of the shop. He found himself in a badly lit room stacked to the ceiling with all kinds of old and secondhand sporting goods — torn football bladders, broken bats, rackets without strings, broken darts and tattered badminton nets.

Mr Kumar began examining a number of old cricket bats, and after a few minutes he said "Ah!" and picked up one of the bats and held it out to Ranji.

"This is it!" he said. "This is the luckiest of all my old bats. This is the bat I made a century with!" And he gave it a twirl and started hitting an imaginary ball to all corners of the room.

"Of course it's an old bat, but it hasn't lost any of its magic," said Mr Kumar, pausing in his stroke-making to recover his breath. He held it out to Ranji. "Here, take it! I'll lend it to you for the rest of the cricket season. You won't fail with it."

Ranji took the bat and gazed at it with awe and delight.

"Is it really the bat you made a century with?" he asked.

"It is," said Mr Kumar. "And it may get you a hundred runs too!"

Ranji spent a nervous week waiting for Saturday's match. His school team would be playing a strong side from another town. There was a lot of class work that week, so Ranji did not get much time to practise with the other boys. As he had no brothers or sisters, he asked Koki, the girl next door, to bowl to him in the garden. Koki bowled quite well, but Ranji liked to hit the ball hard — "just to get used to the bat," he told her — and she soon got tired of chasing the ball all over the garden.

At last Saturday arrived, bright and sunny and just right for cricket.

Suraj won the toss for the school and took first batting.

The opening batsmen put on thirty runs without being separated. The visiting fast bowlers couldn't do much. The spin bowlers came on, and immediately there was a change in the game. Two wickets fell in one over, and the

score was 33 for 2. Suraj made a few quick runs, then he too was out to one of the spinners, caught behind the wicket. The next batsman was clean bowled — 46 for 4 — and it was Ranji's turn to bat.

He walked slowly to the wicket. The fielders crowded round him. He took guard and prepared for the first ball.

The bowler took a short run and then the ball was twirling towards Ranji, looking as though it would spin away from his bat as he leant forward into his stroke.

And then a thrill ran through Ranji's arm as he felt the ball meet the springy willow of the bat.

Crack!

The ball, hit firmly with the middle of Ranji's bat, streaked past the helpless bowler and sped towards the boundary. Four runs!

The bowler was annoyed, with the result that his next ball was a loose full-toss. Ranji swung it to the on-side boundary for another four.

And that was only the beginning. Now Ranji began to play all the strokes he knew: late cuts and square cuts, straight drives, on-drives and off-drives. The rival captain tried all his bowlers, fast and spin, but none of them could remove Ranji, who sent the fielders scampering all over the field.

At the lunch break he had scored 40. And twenty minutes after lunch, when Suraj closed the innings, Ranji was not out with 58.

The rival team was bowled out for a poor score, and Ranji's school won the match.

On his way home Ranji stopped at Mr Kumar's shop to

give him the good news.

"We won!" he said. "And I made 58 — my highest score so far. It really is a lucky bat!"

"I told you so," said Mr Kumar, giving Ranji a warm handshake. "There'll be bigger scores yet."

Ranji went home in high spirits. He was so pleased that he stopped at the Jumna Sweet Shop and bought two luddoos for Koki. She liked cricket but she liked luddoos even more.

Mr Kumar was right. It was only the beginning of Ranji's success with the bat. In the next game he scored 40, and was out when he grew careless and allowed himself to be stumped by the wicket-keeper. The game that followed was a two-day match, and Ranji, who was now batting at No. 3, made 45 runs. He hit a number of boundaries before being caught. In the second innings, when the school team needed only 60 runs for victory, Ranji was batting with 25 when the winning runs were hit.

Everyone was pleased with him — his coach, his captain, Suraj and Mr Kumar ... but no one knew about the lucky bat. That was a secret between Ranji and Mr Kumar.

One evening, during an informal game on the maidaan, Ranji's friend Bhim slipped while running after the ball, and cut his hand on a sharp stone. Ranji took him to a doctor near the clock tower, where the wound was washed and bandaged. As it was getting late, he decided to go straight home. Usually he walked, but that evening he caught a bus near the clock tower.

When he got home, his mother brought him a cup of

tea and while he was drinking it, Koki walked in. The first thing she said was, "Ranji, where's your bat?"

"Oh, I must have left it on the maidaan when Bhim got hurt," said Ranji, starting up and spilling his tea. "I'd better go and get it now, or it will disappear."

"You can fetch it tomorrow," said his mother. "It's getting dark."

"I'll take a torch," said Ranji.

He was worried about the bat. Without it, his luck might desert him. He hadn't the patience to wait for a bus, and ran all the way to the maidaan.

The maidaan was deserted and there was no sign of the bat. And then Ranji remembered that he'd had it with him on the bus, after saying goodbye to Bhim at the clock tower. He must have left it on the bus!

Well, he'd never find it now. The bat was lost for ever. And on Saturday Ranji's school would be playing their last and most important match of the cricket season against a visiting team from Delhi.

Next day he was at Mr Kumar's shop, looking very sorry for himself.

"What's the matter?" asked Mr Kumar.

"I've lost the bat," said Ranji. "Your lucky bat. The one I made all those runs with! I left it on the bus. And the day after tomorrow we are playing the Delhi school, and I'll be out for a duck, and we'll lose our chance of being the school champions."

Mr Kumar looked a little anxious at first; then he smiled and said, "You can still make all the runs you want."

"But I don't have the bat any more," said Ranji.

"Any bat will do," said Mr Kumar.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it's the batsman and not the bat that matters. Shall I tell you something? That old bat I gave you was no different from any other bat I've used. True, I made lots of runs with it, but I made runs with other bats too. I never depended on a special bat for my runs. A bat has magic only when the batsman has magic! What you needed was *confidence*, not a bat. And by believing in the bat, you got your confidence back!"

"What's confidence?" asked Ranji. It was a new word for him.

"Con - fi - dence," said Mr Kumar slowly. "Confidence is knowing you are good."

"And I can be good without the bat?"

"Of course. You have always been good. You are good now. You will be good the day after tomorrow. Remember that. If you remember it, you'll make the runs."

On Saturday Ranji walked to the wicket with a bat borrowed from Bhim.

The school team had lost its first wicket with only 2 runs on the board. Ranji went in at this stage. The Delhi school's opening bowler was sending down some really fast ones. Ranji faced up to him.

The first ball was very fast but it wasn't on a good length. Quick on his feet, Ranji stepped back and pulled it hard to the on-boundary. The ball soared over the heads of the fielders and landed with a crash in crate full of cold-drink bottles.

A six! Everyone stood up and cheered.

And it was only the beginning of Ranji's wonderful innings.

The match ended in a draw, but Ranji's 75 was the talk of the school.

On his way home he bought a dozen luddoos. Six for Koki — and six for Mr Kumar.

The Long Day

Suraj was awakened by the sound of his mother busying herself in the kitchen. He lay in bed, looking through the open window at the sky getting lighter and the dawn pushing its way into the room. He knew there was something important about this new day, but for some time he couldn't remember what it was. Then, as the room cleared, his mind cleared. His school report would be arriving in the post.

Suraj knew he had failed. The class teacher had told him so. But his mother would only know of it when she read the report, and Suraj did not want to be in the house when she received it. He was sure it would be arriving today. So he had told his mother that he would be having his midday meal with his friend Somi — Somi, who wasn't even in town at the moment — and would be home only for the evening meal. By that time, he hoped, his mother would have recovered from the shock. He was glad his father was away on tour.

He slipped out of bed and went to the kitchen. His mother was surprised to see him up so early.

"I'm going for a walk, Ma," he said, "and then I'll go on to Somi's house."

"Well, have your bath first and put something in your stomach."

Suraj went to the tap in the courtyard and took a quick bath. He put on a clean shirt and shorts. Carelessly he brushed his thick, curly hair, knowing he couldn't bring much order to its wildness. Then he gulped down a glass of milk and hurried out of the house. The postman wouldn't arrive for a couple of hours, but Suraj felt that the earlier his start the better. His mother was surprised and pleased to see him up and about so early.

Suraj was out on the maidaan and still the sun had not risen. The maidaan was an open area of grass, about a hundred square metres, and from the middle of it could be seen the mountains, range upon range of them, stepping into the sky. A game of football was in progress, and one of the players called out to Suraj to join them. Suraj said he wouldn't play for more than ten minutes, because he had some business to attend to; he kicked off his chap-pals and ran barefoot after the ball. Everyone was playing barefoot. It was an informal game, and the players were of all ages and sizes, from bearded Sikhs to small boys of six or seven. Suraj ran all over the place without actually getting in touch with the ball — he wasn't much good at football — and finally got into a scramble before the goal, fell and scratched his knee. He retired from the game even sooner than he had intended.

The scratch wasn't bad but there was some blood on

his knee. He wiped it clean with his handkerchief and limped off the maidaan. He went in the direction of the railway station, but not through the bazaar. He went by way of the canal, which came from the foot of the nearest mountain, flowed through the town and down to the river. Beside the canal were the washerwomen, scrubbing and beating out clothes on the stone banks.

The canal was only a metre wide but, due to recent rain, the current was swift and noisy. Suraj stood on the bank, watching the rush of water. There was an inlet at one place, and here some children were bathing, and some were rushing up and down the bank, wearing nothing at all, shouting to each other in high spirits. Suraj felt like taking a dip too, but he did not know any of the children here; most of them were from very poor families. Hands in pockets, he walked along the canal banks.

The sun had risen and was pouring through the branches of the trees that lined the road. The leaves made shadowy patterns on the ground. Suraj tried hard not to think of his school report, but he knew that at any moment now the postman would be handing over a long brown envelope to his mother. He tried to imagine his mother's expression when she read the report; but the more he tried to picture her face, the more certain he was that, on knowing his result, she would show no expression at all. And having no expression on her face was much worse than having one.

Suraj heard the whistle of a train, and knew he was not far from the station. He cut through a field, climbed a hillock and ran down the slope until he was near the

railway tracks. Here came the train, screeching and puffing: in the distance, a big black beetle, and then, when the carriages swung into sight, a centipede ...

Suraj stood a good twenty metres away from the lines, on the slope of the hill. As the train passed, he pulled the handkerchief off his knee and began to wave it furiously. There was something about passing trains that filled him with awe and excitement. All those passengers, with mysterious lives and mysterious destinations, were people he wanted to know, people whose mysteries he wanted to unfold. He had been in a train recently, when his parents had taken him to bathe in the sacred river, Ganga, at Hardwar. He wished he could be in a train now; or, better still, be an engine-driver, with no more books and teachers and school reports. He did not know of any thirteen-year-old engine-drivers, but he saw himself driving the engine, shouting orders to the stoker; it made him feel powerful to be in control of a mighty steam-engine.

Someone — another boy — returned his wave, and the two waved at each other for a few seconds, and then the train had passed, its smoke spiralling backwards.

Suraj felt a little lonely now. Somehow, the passing of the train left him with a feeling of being alone in a wide empty world. He was feeling hungry too. He went back to the field where he had seen some lichi trees, climbed into one of them and began plucking and peeling and eating the juicy red-skinned fruit. No one seemed to own the lichi trees because, although a dog appeared below and began barking, no one else appeared. Suraj kept spitting lichi seeds at the dog, and the dog kept barking

at him. Eventually the dog lost interest and slunk off.

Suraj began to feel drowsy in the afternoon heat. The lichi trees offered a lot of shade below, so he came down from the tree and sat on the grass, his back resting against the tree-trunk. A mynah-bird came hopping up to his feet and looked at him curiously, its head to one side.

Insects kept buzzing around Suraj. He swiped at them once or twice, but then couldn't make the effort to keep swiping. He opened his shirt buttons. The air was very hot, very still; the only sound was the faint buzzing of the insects. His head fell forward on his chest.

He opened his eyes to find himself being shaken, and looked up into the round, cheerful face of his friend Ranji.

"What are you doing, sleeping here?" asked Ranji, who was a couple of years younger than Suraj. "Have you run away from home?"

"Not yet," said Suraj. "And what are *you* doing here?"

"Came for lichis."

"So did I."

They sat together for a while and talked and ate lichis. Then Ranji suggested that they visit the bazaar to eat fried pakoras.

"I haven't any money," said Suraj.

"That doesn't matter," said Ranji, who always seemed to be in funds. "I have two rupees."

So they walked to the bazaar. They crossed the field, walked back past the canal, skirted the maidaan, came to the clock tower and entered the bazaar.

The evening crowd had just begun to fill the road, and there was a lot of bustle and noise: the street-vendors

called their wares in high, strident voices; children shouted and women bargained. There was a medley of smells and aromas coming from the little restaurants and sweet shops, and a medley of colour in the bangle and kite shops. Suraj and Ranji ate their pakoras, felt thirsty, and gazed at the rows and rows of coloured bottles at the cold-drinks shop, where at least ten varieties of sweet, sticky, fizzy drinks were available. But they had already finished the two rupees, so there was nothing for them to do but quench their thirst at the municipal tap.

Afterwards they wandered down the crowded street, examining the shop-fronts, commenting on the passers-by, and every now and then greeting some friend or acquaintance. Darkness came on suddenly, and then the bazaar was lit up, the big shops with bright electric and neon lights, the street-vendors with oil-lamps. The bazaar at night was even more exciting than during the day.

They traversed the bazaar from end to end, and when they were at the clock tower again, Ranji said he had to go home, and left Suraj. It was nearing Suraj's dinner-time and so, unwillingly, he too turned homewards. He did not want it to appear that he was deliberately staying out late because of the school report.

The lights were on in the front room when he got home. He waited outside, secure in the darkness of the verandah, watching the lighted room. His mother would be waiting for him, she would probably have the report in her hand or on the kitchen shelf, and she would have lots and lots of questions to ask him.

All the cares of the world seemed to descend on Suraj as he crept into the house.

"You're late," said his mother. "Come and have your food."

Suraj said nothing, but removed his shoes outside the kitchen and sat down cross-legged on the kitchen floor, which was where he took his meals. He was tired and hungry. He no longer cared about anything.

"One of your class-fellows dropped in," said his mother. "He said your reports were sent out today. They'll arrive tomorrow."

Tomorrow! Suraj felt a great surge of relief.

But then, just as suddenly, his spirits fell again.

Tomorrow ... a further postponement of the dreaded moment, another night and another morning ... something would have to be done about it!

"Ma," he said abruptly. "Somi has asked me to his house again tomorrow."

"I don't know how his mother puts up with you so often," said Suraj's mother.

Suraj lay awake in bed, planning the morrow's activities: a game of cricket or football on the maidaan; perhaps a dip in the canal; a half-hour watching the trains thunder past; and in the evening an hour in the bazaar, among the kites and balloons and rose-coloured fizzy drinks and round dripping syrupy sweets ... Perhaps, in the morning, he could persuade his mother to give him two or three rupees ... It would be his last rupees for quite some time.

When the Guavas are Ripe

Guava trees are easy to climb. And guavas are good to eat. So it's little wonder that an orchard of guava trees is a popular place with boys and girls.

Just across the road from Ranji's house, on the other side of a low wall, was a large guava orchard. The monsoon rains were almost over. It was a warm humid day in September, and the guavas were ripening, turning from green to gold; no longer hard, but growing soft and sweet and juicy.

The schools were closed because of a religious festival. Ranji's father was at work in his office. Ranji's mother was enjoying an afternoon siesta on a cot in the backyard. His grandmother was busy teaching her pet parrot to recite a prayer.

"I feel like getting into those guava trees," said Ranji to himself. "It's months since I climbed a tree."

He was soon across the road and over the wall and into the trees. He chose a tree that grew in the middle of the orchard, where it was unlikely that he would be disturbed; then he climbed swiftly into its branches. A cluster

of guavas swung just above him. He reached up for one of them, but to his surprise he found himself clutching a small bare foot which had suddenly been thrust through the foliage.

Having caught the foot, Ranji did not let go. Instead he pulled hard on it. There was a squeal and someone came toppling down on him. Ranji found himself clutching at arms and legs. Together they crashed through a couple of branches and landed with a thud on the soft ground beneath the tree.

Ranji and the intruder struggled fiercely. They rolled about on the grass. Ranji tried a judo hold — without any success. Then he saw that his opponent was a girl. It was his friend and neighbour, Koki.

"It's you!" he gasped.

"It's me," said Koki. "And what are *you* doing here?"

"Get your knee out of my stomach and I'll tell you."

When he had recovered his breath, he said, "I just felt like climbing a tree."

"So did I."

He stared at her. There was guava juice at the corners of her mouth and on her chin.

"Are the guavas good?" he asked.

"Quite sweet, in this tree," said Koki. "You find another tree for yourself, Ranji. There must be thirty or forty trees to choose from."

"And all going to waste," said Ranji. "Look, some of the guavas have been spoilt by the birds."

"Nobody wants them, it seems."

Koki climbed back into her tree, and Ranji obligingly

walked a little further and climbed another tree. After a few polite exchanges they fell silent, their attention given over entirely to the eating of guavas.

"I've eaten five," said Koki after some time.

"You'd better stop."

"You're only saying that because you've just started."

"Well, three's enough for me."

"I'm getting a tummy-ache, I think."

"I warned you. Come on, I'll take you home. We can come back tomorrow. There are still lots of guavas left. Hundreds!"

"I don't think I want to eat any more," said Koki.

She felt better the next day — so well, in fact, that Ranji found her leaning on the gate, waiting for him to join her. She was accompanied by her small brother, Teju, who was only six and very mischievous.

"How are you feeling today?" asked Ranji.

"Hungry," said Koki.

"Why did you bring your brother?"

"He wants to start climbing trees."

Soon they were in the orchard. Ranji and Koki helped Teju into the branches of one of the smaller trees and then made for other trees, disturbing a party of parrots who flew in circles round the orchard, screaming their protests.

Two boys and a girl talking to each other from three different trees can make quite a lot of noise, and it wasn't only the birds who were disturbed. Though they did not know it, the orchard belonged to a wealthy property-

dealer and he employed a watchman, whose duty it was to keep away birds, children, monkeys, flying-foxes and other fruit-eating pests. But on a hot sultry afternoon Gopal the watchman could not resist taking a nap. He was stretched out under a shady jack-fruit tree, snoring so loudly that the flies who had been buzzing round him felt that a storm was brewing and kept their distance.

He woke to the sound of voices raised high in glee. Sitting up, he brushed a ladybird from his long moustache, then seized his lathi, a long stout stick usually carried by watchmen.

"Who's there?" he shouted, struggling to his feet.

There was a sudden silence in the trees.

"Who's there?" he called again.

No answer.

"I must have been dreaming," he muttered, and was preparing to lie down and take another nap when Teju, who had been watching him, burst into laughter.

"Ho!" shouted the watchman, coming to life again. "Thieves! I'll settle you!" And he began striding towards the centre of the orchard, boasting all the time of his physical prowess. "I'm not afraid of thieves, bandits, or wild beasts! I'll have you know that I was once the wrestling champion of the entire district of Dehra. Come on out and fight me if you dare!"

"Run!" hissed Koki, scrambling down from her tree.

"Run!" shouted Ranji, as though it were a cricket match.

Teju was so startled by the sudden activity that he tumbled out of his tree and began crying, and Ranji and Koki



had to go to his aid.

The sight of an enormous ex-wrestler bearing down on them was enough to make Teju stop crying and get to his feet. Then all three were fleeing across the grove, the watchman a little way behind them, waving his lathi and shouting at the top of his voice. Although he was an ex-wrestler (or perhaps because of it) he could not run very fast, and was still huffing and puffing some twenty metres behind them when they climbed up and over the wall. He could not climb walls either.

They ran off in different directions before returning home.

Next day, Ranji met Koki and Teju at the far end of the road.

"Is he there?" asked Koki.

"I haven't seen him. But he must be around somewhere."

"Maybe he's gone for his lunch. We'll just walk past and take a quick look."

The three of them strolled casually down the road. Koki said the gardens were looking very pretty. Teju gazed admiringly at a boy flying a kite from a roof-top. Ranji kept one eye on the road and one eye on the orchard wall. A squirrel ran along the top of the wall; the parrots were back in the guava trees.

They moved closer to the wall. Ranji leaned casually against it and Koki began to pick little daisies growing at the edge of the road. Teju, unable to hide his curiosity, pulled himself up on the wall and looked over. At the

same time, Gopal the watchman, who had been hiding behind the wall waiting for them, stood up slowly and glared fiercely at Teju.

Teju gulped, but he did not flinch. He was looking straight into the watchman's red angry eyes.

"And what can I do for you?" growled Gopal.

"I was just looking," said Teju.

"At what?"

"At the view."

Gopal was a little baffled. They looked just like the children he'd chased away yesterday, but he couldn't be sure. They didn't *look* guilty. But did children ever look guilty?

"There's a better view from the other side of the road," he said gruffly. "Now be off!"

"What lovely guavas," said Koki, smiling sweetly. There weren't many people who could resist that smile!

"True," said Ranji, with the air of one who was an expert on guavas and all things good to eat. "They are just the right size and colour. I don't think I've seen better. But they'll be spoilt by the birds if you don't gather them soon."

"It's none of your business," said the watchman.

"Just look at his muscles," said Teju, trying a different approach. "He's really strong!"

Gopal looked pleased for once. He was proud of his former prowess, even though he was now rather flabby around the waist.

"You look like a wrestler," said Ranji.

"*I am* a wrestler," said Gopal.

"I told you so," said Koki. "What else could he be?"

"I'm a retired wrestler," said Gopal.

"You don't look retired," said Teju, fast learning that flattery can get you almost anywhere.

Gopal swelled with pride; such admiration hadn't come his way for a long time. To Koki he looked like a bull-frog swelling up, but she thought it better not to say so.

"Do you want to see my muscles?" he asked.

"Yes, yes!" they cried. "Do show us!"

Gopal peeled off his shirt and thumped his chest. It sounded like a drum. They were really impressed. Then he bent his elbow and his biceps stood up like cricket balls.

"You can touch them," he said generously.

Teju poked a finger into Gopal's biceps.

"Mister Universe!" he exclaimed.

Gopal glowed all over. He liked these children. How intelligent they were! Not everyone had the sense to appreciate his strength, his manliness, his magnificent physique!

"Climb over the wall and join me," he said. "Come sit on the grass and I'll tell you about the time when I was a wrestling champion."

Over the wall they came, and sat politely on the grass. Gopal told them about some of his exploits; how he had vanquished a world-famous wrestler in five seconds flat, and how he had saved a carload of travellers from drowning by single-handedly dragging their car out of a river. They listened patiently. Then Teju mentioned that he

was feeling hungry.

"Hungry?" said Gopal. "Why didn't you tell me before? I'll bring you some guavas, that's all there is to eat here. I know which tree has the best ones. And they're all going to rot if no one eats them — no one's buying the crop this year, the owner's price is too high!"

Gopal hurried off and soon returned with a basket full of guavas.

"Help yourselves," he said. "But don't eat too many, you'll get sick."

So they munched guavas and listened to Gopal tell them about the time he was waylaid by three bandits and how he threw them all into the village pond.

"Will you come again tomorrow?" asked Gopal eagerly, when the guavas were finished and the children got up to leave. "Come tomorrow and I'll tell you another story."

"We'll come tomorrow," said Teju, looking at all the guava trees still laden with fruit.

Somehow it seemed very important to Gopal that they should come again. It was lonely in the orchard. Koki sensed this, and said, "We like your stories."

"They are good stories," said Ranji, even if they were not entirely true, he thought ...

They climbed over the wall and waved goodbye to Gopal.

They came again the next day.

And even when the guava season was over and Gopal had nothing to offer them but his stories, they went to see him because by that time they had grown to like him.

The King and the Tree-Goddess

This is one of the stories Koki's grandmother told the children on a wet monsoon evening, when it was impossible to play outside. Grandmother loved trees, and this was one of her favourite tree stories.

There was once a king living in the Himalayan foothills, who longed to build himself a palace more beautiful than any he had seen in that part of the world. He could not make it richer, taller or stronger than any other without going to a great deal of expense and trouble. So he decided to build something different: the entire palace was to be supported by one column only, and that column was to be made from the tallest tree in the kingdom.

In the Himalayas there are many tall trees — spruce and pine, oak and deodar. And the tallest and the strongest are the deodars, whose very name, *Deo-Dar*, means Tree of God.

The King sent for his Prime Minister and said, "Send men to my forests far and near, and tell them to cut down and bring to this city without delay the largest deodar

they can find."

"But the deodar is a sacred tree," protested his daughter. "It is used only for building temples."

"All the more reason for me to have one," said the King. "My palace shall be as magnificent as any temple!"

The Prime Minister sent out thirty men but they soon returned, saying that though there were many great deodars in the kingdom, they could never carry or drag them over so much difficult country as lay between the forests and the city.

When the King heard this, he called his son and said, "Take your horsemen, and with the help of your horses, bring me one of these trees."

The prince rode out with his horsemen but returned after a few days, saying, "No horses could move such a tree an inch. We have tried oxen too, but without any success."

"Well, then, try elephants," said the King.

Elephants were brought from the plains, but the hills were too steep for them, and the paths too narrow; they had to return to the valley.

"Very well," said the King angrily. "In one of my own parks you must find me a tree just as big as any in the forests. Bring it to me within seven days."

After much searching, the King's men found a splendid deodar tree growing not far from the city. It was worshipped by the people of many villages round about, because within it lived a Goddess, and it was she who gave to the tree its great strength, size and beauty.

When the Prime Minister and his men had decided

that the column for the King's palace must be made from this lofty deodar tree, they came with garlands, lamps and music to pay their respects to the Goddess inside, and to warn her that she must leave her abode. Within seven days it had to be cut to the ground.

They lit their lamps and placed them in a circle round the tree. They hung their garlands upon the branches and tied nosegays among the leaves. Then, joining hands, some danced, and others sang:

With cruel axe we've come
To fell your age-long home;
Forgive us, great Tree-Goddess —
We dance before your throne!
To please the King must we
Cut down your loveliest tree.

The Tree-Goddess heard, and understood what was about to happen. She remained quiet as a resting breeze for a few moments, and then all her leaves began to whisper and her topmost branches bowed. The men went away satisfied that she had heard and understood.

That night, when the King was asleep, a glorious figure draped in shining green foliage appeared to him, and spoke in a voice that was like the rustle of autumn leaves:

"I am the Goddess of the Deodar tree, great King. Your men have told me that you intend to cut me down. I have come to beg you to change your mind."

"No, my mind is made up," answered the King in his dream. "Yours is the only tree in all my parks strong enough to support by itself a palace, and therefore I must

have it."

"But consider, oh King! For hundreds of years I have been worshipped by the people of all the villages in your kingdom, and nothing but good has gone out from me to them. The birds nest in me. I send a most lovely shade upon the grass. Men rest against my trunk and wild creatures rub themselves against me. The earth blesses me, and sends up new plants and herbs under my protective arms. I bind the earth with my strong roots. Children play at my feet, and women returning from the fields seek refuge in my coolness."

"All true enough, good Tree-Goddess," said the King, "but all the same I cannot spare you. My mind is made up, my will cannot be shaken."

The Tree-Goddess sank her head upon her breast and spoke in tones of great sorrow:

"Then, mighty King, grant me one last request. Let me be felled in three parts. First my head, with its crown of waving greenery. Next my middle, with its hundred strong arms and hands. And last my base, which bears the heaviest and knottiest of my limbs upon it."

"This is a strange request," said the King. "I have never before heard of someone who wished to suffer the death stroke *thrice*! Why not suffer it once, and have done with it?"

"The reason is plain," said the Tree-Goddess. "Dozens of young deodar trees have sprung from me, and have grown up around me. Should you fell me with one mighty stroke, my weight would certainly crush all my children to death. But if I suffer the stroke three times, and fall in

three pieces, some of the young ones may escape. Is my prayer granted?"

"Indeed it is," said the astonished King, as the Tree-Goddess faded from his vision.

The next morning the King called his children and his ministers and his foresters to him, and told them that he had changed his mind, and that the column for the new palace should be built of stone, not wood.

"For," said he, "within the deodar tree lives a spirit nobler than my own." And he told them of his vision, and they all marvelled.

And the King built his palace upon a great column of stone, and around its base he created a beautiful park, and the children of the city and the surrounding villages flocked to the gardens to sit on the grass and enjoy the many beautiful flowers and trees that had been planted on all sides.

Taking the example of the King, no one built their houses of wood any more. The houses were made of stone, and the great deodars were able to spread freely through the forests.

"And if you go up into the mountains," said Grandmother, "you can still see those forests, all the way up the sacred river Ganga, to its source near the eternal snows."

The Fight

Anil had been less than a month in Dehra when he discovered the pool in the forest. It was the height of summer, and the school he was to join had not yet opened. Having as yet made no friends in the small town in the foothills, he wandered about a good deal by himself, into the hills and forests that stretched away on all sides of the town.

It was hot, very hot, at that time of the year, and Anil, aged thirteen, walked about in his vest and shorts, his brown feet white with the chalky dust that flew up from the ground. The earth was parched, the grass brown, the trees listless, hardly stirring, waiting for a cool wind or a refreshing shower of rain. It was on one of these tiresome days that Anil found the pool in the forest. The water had a gentle green translucency, and he could see the smooth round pebbles at the bottom of the pool. It was fed by a small stream that emerged from a cluster of rocks.

During the monsoon this stream would be a rushing torrent, cascading down from the hills; but during the summer it was barely a trickle. The rocks, however, held

the water in the pool, and it didn't dry up like the pools in the plains.

When Anil saw the pool, he didn't hesitate to get into it. He had often been swimming, alone or with friends, when he had lived with his parents in a thirsty town in the middle of the Rajasthan desert. There, he had known only sticky, muddy pools, where buffaloes wallowed in the slush. He had never seen a pool like this — so clean and cool and inviting. He threw off all his clothes, as he had always done when swimming in the plains, and leapt into the water. His limbs were supple, and his dark body glistened in patches of sunlit water.

The next day he came again to quench his body in the cool waters of the forest pool. He was there for almost an hour, sliding in and out of the limpid green water, or lying stretched out on the smooth yellow rocks in the shade of broad-leaved sal trees.

It was while he lay naked on a rock that he noticed another boy standing a little distance away, staring at him in a rather hostile manner. The other boy was a year or two older than Anil, taller and thick-set, with a broad nose. He had only just noticed Anil, and he stood at the edge of the pool, wearing a pair of bathing shorts, waiting for Anil to explain himself.

When Anil didn't say anything, the other called out. "What are you doing here, mister?"

Anil, who was prepared to be friendly, was surprised at the other's hostility.

"I am swimming," he replied. "Why don't you join me?"

"I always swim alone," said the other. "This is my pool. I did not invite you to it. And why aren't you wearing any clothes?"

"It is not your business what I wear or do not wear. I have nothing to be ashamed of."

"You skinny fellow, put on your clothes!"

"Fat fool, take yours off!"

This was too much for the stranger. He strode up to Anil, who still sat on the rock; and, planting his broad feet firmly on the sand, said (as though it would settle the matter once and for all), "Don't you know I am a Punjabi? I do not take insults from villagers like you!"

"So you like to fight with villagers," said Anil. "Well, I do not belong to your village. I am a Rajput!"

"I am a Punjabi!"

"I am a Rajput!"

They had reached an impasse. One had said he was a Punjabi, the other had proclaimed himself a Rajput. There was little else that could be said.

"You understand that I am a Punjabi?" repeated the stranger, uneasily aware that the other had not seemed sufficiently impressed.

"I have heard you say it three times," replied Anil.

"Then why don't you run off?"

"I am waiting for you to run!"

"I shall have to thrash you," said the Punjabi boy, assuming a violent attitude and showing Anil the palm of his hand.

"Let me see you do it," said Anil.

"You *will* see me do it," said the Punjabi boy.



Anil waited. The other boy made an odd, hissing sound. They stared each other in the eye for almost a minute. Then the Punjabi boy slapped Anil across the face with all his strength. Anil staggered back, feeling giddy. There were thick red finger-marks on his cheek.

"There you are," exclaimed his assailant. "Will you be off now?"

By way of reply, Anil swung his arm up and pushed a hard, bony fist into his adversary's face.

And then they were at each other's throats, swaying together on the rock, tumbling on to the sand, rolling over and over, their arms and legs locked in a fierce struggle. Clawing, grasping and cursing, they rolled right into the shallows of the pool.

Even in the water they continued fighting. Spluttering and covered with mud, they groped for each other's heads and throats. But after five minutes of frenzied struggle, neither boy had emerged victorious. Their bodies heaving with exhaustion, they stood back from each other, making tremendous efforts to speak.

"Now — now do you realise — I am a Punjabi?" gasped the stranger.

"Do you — know I am a Rajput?" said Anil with difficulty.

They gave a moment's consideration to each other's answers, and in that moment of silence there was only their heavy breathing and the rapid pounding of their hearts.

"Then you will not leave the pool?" said the Punjabi boy.

"I will not leave it," said Anil.

"Then we shall have to continue the fight," said the other.

"All right," said Anil.

But neither boy moved, neither took the initiative.

Then the Punjabi boy had an inspiration.

"We will continue the fight tomorrow," he said. "If you dare to come back tomorrow, we will continue the fight, and I will not let you off as easily as I have done today!"

"I will come tomorrow," said Anil. "I will be ready for you."

They turned their backs on each other and returned to their respective rocks, where they gathered their belongings, then left the forest by different routes.

When Anil got home, he found it difficult to account for the cuts and bruises that showed on his face, arms and legs. He could not conceal the fact that he had been in a bad fight, and his mother insisted on his staying at home for the rest of the day.

That evening, though, he slipped out of the house and went to the bazaar where he found comfort and solace in a bottle of vividly coloured lemonade and a banana-leaf full of hot, sweet jalebis. He had just finished the lemonade when he saw his recent adversary coming down the road.

Anil's first impulse was to turn away and look elsewhere; his second to throw the empty bottle at his enemy; but he did neither of these things. Instead, he stood his ground and scowled at his opponent. And the Punjabi

boy said nothing either, but scowled back with equal ferocity.

The next day was as hot as the previous one. Anil felt weak and lazy and not at all eager for a fight. His body was stiff and sore after the previous day's encounter. But he couldn't refuse the challenge. Not to turn up at the pool would be an acknowledgement of defeat. But from the way he was feeling, he knew he would be beaten in another fight. Yet he must defy his enemy, outwit him if possible. To surrender now would be to forfeit all rights to the pool in the forest; and he knew it was his pool.

He was half-hoping that the Punjabi boy would have forgotten the challenge, but as soon as Anil arrived he saw his opponent stripped to the waist, sitting on a rock at the far end of the pool. The Punjabi boy was rubbing oil on his body, massaging it into his broad thighs. He saw Anil beneath the sal trees, and called a challenge across the water.

"Come over to this side and fight!" he shouted.

But Anil was not going to submit to any conditions laid down by his opponent.

"Come *this* side and fight," he shouted back defiantly.

"Swim over and fight me here!" called the other. "Or perhaps you cannot swim the length of this pool!"

Anil could have swum the length of the pool a dozen times without tiring, and in this department he knew he could show the Punjabi boy his superiority. Slipping out of his vest and shorts, he dived straight into the water, cutting through it like a golden fish and surfacing with hardly a splash. The Punjabi boy's mouth hung open in

amazement.

"You can dive!" he exclaimed.

"It is easy," said Anil, treading water and waiting for another challenge. "Can't you dive?"

"No," said the other. "I jump straight in. But if you will tell me how, I'll make a dive."

"It is easy," said Anil. "Stand straight on the rock, hold your arms out, and allow your head to displace your feet."

The Punjabi boy stood up, stiff and straight, stretched out his arms, and threw himself at the water. He landed flat on his belly, with a crash that sent the birds screaming out of the trees.

Anil burst into laughter.

"Are you trying to empty the pool?" he asked, as the Punjabi boy came to the surface, spouting water like a small whale.

"Wasn't it good?" asked the boy, evidently proud of his feat.

"Not very good," said Anil. "You should have more practice. See, I will do it again!"

And pulling himself up on a rock, he executed another perfect dive. The Punjabi boy waited for him to come up, but, swimming under water in a world of soft lights and crooked sunshine, Anil circled the boy and came up from behind.

"How did you do that?" asked the astonished youth.

"Can't you swim under water?" asked Anil.

"No, but I will try."

The Punjabi boy made a tremendous effort to plunge to the bottom of the pool; indeed, he thought he had

gone right down, but his bottom, like a duck's, remained above the surface.

Anil, however, did not want to sound too discouraging. He was involved in a game of high diplomacy.

"That was not bad," he said. "But you need a lot of practice."

"Will you teach me?" asked his enemy.

"If you like, I will teach you."

"You must teach me. If you do not teach me, I will thrash you. Will you come here every day and teach me?"

"If you like," said Anil. They had pulled themselves out of the water and were sitting side by side on a smooth grey rock.

"My name is Vijay," said the Punjabi boy. "What is yours?"

"It is Anil."

"I am strong, am I not?" said Vijay, bending his arm so that a ball of muscle stood up.

"You are strong," said Anil. "You are like a wrestler, a pahlwan."

"One day I will be Mister Universe!" said Vijay, slapping his thighs, which shook with the impact of his hand.

He looked critically at Anil's hard, thin body. "You are quite strong yourself," he conceded, "but you are too bony. I know, you people do not eat enough. You must come and have your meals with me. I drink a pitcher of milk every day. You see, we have got our own cow. Be my friend, and I will make you a real pahlwan like me! I know – if you teach me to dive and swim under water, I will make you a pahlwan. This is fair, isn't it?"

"It's fair," said Anil, though he doubted if he was getting the better of the exchange.

Vijay put his arm around the younger boy's shoulders and said, "We are friends now, yes?"

They looked at each other with unflinching eyes, and in that moment a friendship was born.

"We are friends," said Anil.

The birds had settled again in the branches of the sal trees, and the pool was still and limpid in the afternoon shadows.

"It is our pool," said Vijay. "Nobody else can come here. Who would dare?"

"Yes, who would dare?" said Anil, smiling with the knowledge that he had won the day.

The Window

When Amir was thirteen, he decided that he was old enough to have a room of his own.

"What for?" asked his mother.

"The kids make too much noise," he said, referring to his younger brothers and sisters. "I can't study."

"Well, if you really want to study, you can have your own room," said his grandfather, who owned the old building. "There's the room on the roof."

So Amir took the room on the roof.

It was a long, low building with large cracks in the walls from which peepul trees were growing. Amir's grandfather said he couldn't afford to have it repaired. There were a number of tenants in the building and they were paying rents that had been fixed forty years back, when rents were very low, so there wasn't much money coming in. Amir's father had a tailor's shop in the bazaar, but that didn't make much money either. The building had a flat roof, with just the one small room — called a barsati — opening on to it. From the window of his room Amir looked out upon a world quite different from the world

below.

The banyan tree, just opposite, was his, and its inhabitants his subjects. There were two squirrels, several mynahs, a crow and, at night, a pair of flying foxes. The squirrels were busy in the afternoon, the birds in the morning and evening, the foxes at night. Amir wasn't very busy. He'd look at his books now and then, but decided that it wasn't a very good year for studying. There was much more to learn from looking out of his window.

At first he felt lonely in the room. But then he discovered the power of the window. It looked out on the banyan tree and the mango grove, on the rather untidy garden, on the broad path running past the building, and out over the roofs of other houses, over roads and fields, as far as the horizon. The path was a busy one: fruit and vegetable vendors came and went, as did the toy-seller and the balloon-man, their wares strung on poles; there were boys on cycles, babies in prams, schoolgirls chattering, housewives quarrelling, old men gossiping ... all passed his way, the way of his window.

Early that summer a tonga came rattling and jingling down the path and stopped in front of the building. A girl and an elderly lady got down, while a servant unloaded their luggage. They went into the house and the tonga moved off.

The next day the girl looked up from the garden and saw Amir at the window.

She had black hair that came to her shoulders. Her eyes were black, like her hair, and just as shiny. She must have been about eleven years old.

"Hallo," said Amir.

She looked up at him suspiciously. "Who are you?" she asked.

"I am a ghost."

She laughed, and her laugh had a gay, mocking quality: "You look like one!"

Amir didn't think her remark was very funny, but he had asked for it.

"What are you doing up there?" she asked.

"Practising magic," he said.

She laughed again but this time without the mockery.

"I don't believe you," she said.

"Why don't you come up and see for yourself?"

She came round to the steps and began climbing them slowly, cautiously. When she entered the room, she stared at Amir and said: "Where's your magic?"

"Come here," he said, and he took her to the window and showed her his world.

She said nothing, just stared out of the window. Then she turned and smiled at Amir, and they were friends.

He only knew that she was called Chummo, and that she had come with her aunt for the summer months. He did not need to know any more about her, and she did not need to know any more about him except that he wasn't really a ghost.

She came up the steps nearly every day and joined Amir at the window. There was a lot of excitement to be had in the world of the window, especially when the monsoon rains arrived.

At the first rumblings, women would rush outside to

retrieve their washing from the clothes-line and, if there was a breeze, to chase a few garments across the compound. When the rain came, it came with a vengeance, making a bog of the garden and a river of the path.

A cyclist would come riding furiously down the path, an elderly gentleman would be having difficulty with his umbrella, naked toddlers would be frisking about in the rain. Sometimes Amir would run out on the roof and shout and dance in the rain. And the rain would come through the open door and window of the room, flooding the floor and making an island of the bed.

But the window was more fun than anything else.

"It's like a film," said Chummo. "The window is the screen, the world outside is the picture."

Soon the mangoes were ripe and Chummo was in the branches of the mango tree as often as she was at Amir's window. Amir was supposed to be deep in study, so any forays into the mango tree on his part would not have pleased his grandfather. But from the window he had a good view of the tree, and he could speak to Chummo from about the same level. She brought him unripe mangoes, and they ate far too many of them and had tummy aches for the rest of the day.

"Let's make a garden on the roof," said Chummo.

"How do we do that?" asked Amir.

"It's easy. We bring up mud and bricks and make the flower-beds. Then we plant the seeds. We'll grow all sorts of flowers."

"The roof will fall in," said Amir.

"Never mind," said Chummo.

They spent two days carrying buckets of mud up the steps to the roof and laying out the flower-beds. It was hard work, but Chummo did most of it. When the beds were ready, they had a planting ceremony. But apart from a few small plants collected from the garden below, they had only one kind of seed — pumpkin.

"I can't eat pumpkins," said Amir.

"Have you ever met anyone who likes pumpkins?" asked Chummo.

"No. Everyone hates them."

"True. And yet people keep on growing them, and selling them, and forcing children to eat them."

"They just do it to make us suffer," said Amir.

"True. We'll present our pumpkins to our enemies."

So they planted the pumpkin seeds in the mud and felt proud of themselves.

But the following night it rained very heavily, and in the morning they discovered that everything — except the bricks — had been washed away.

So they returned to the window.

A mynah had been in a fight and the feathers had been knocked off its head. A bougainvillea creeper that had been climbing the wall had sent a long green shoot in through the window.

Chummo said, "Now we can't shut the window without spoiling the creeper."

"Then we won't close the window," said Amir.

And they let the creeper into the room.

The rains passed and an autumn wind came whispering through the branches of the banyan tree. There were red leaves on the ground and the wind picked them up and blew them about so that they looked like butterflies. Amir would watch the sunrise, the sky all red until the first rays splashed the window-sill and crept up the walls of the room. And in the evening Chummo and Amir would watch the sun go down in a sea of fluffy clouds. Sometimes the clouds were pink, sometimes orange; they were nearly always coloured clouds, framed in the window.

"I'm going tomorrow," said Chummo one evening.

Amir was too surprised to say anything.

"You stay here all the time, don't you?" she said.

Amir nodded.

"When I come again next year, you'll still be here, won't you?"

"I suppose so," said Amir.

In the morning the tonga was at the door, and the servant, the aunt and Chummo were in it. Amir was at his window, Chummo waved up to him. Then the driver flicked the pony's reins, the tonga creaked and rattled, the bell jingled. Down the path and through the compound gate went the tonga, and all the time Chummo waved.

When the tonga was out of sight, Amir took the spray of bougainvillea and pushed it out of the room. Then he closed the window. It would be opened only when the spring and Chummo came again.

Mukesh Starts a Zoo

On a visit to Delhi with his parents, Mukesh spent two crowded hours at the zoo. He was dazzled by the many colourful birds, fascinated by the reptiles, charmed by the gibbons and chimps, and awestruck by the big cats — the lions, tigers and leopards. There was no zoo in the small town of Dehra where he lived, and the jungle was some way across the river-bed. So, as soon as he got home, he decided that he would have a zoo of his own.

"I'm going to start a zoo," he announced at breakfast, the day after his return.

"But you don't have any birds or animals," said Dolly, his little sister.

"I'll soon find them," said Mukesh. "That's what a zoo is all about — collecting animals."

He was gazing at the whitewashed walls of the verandah, where a gecko, a small wall lizard, was in pursuit of a fly. A little later Mukesh was trying to catch the lizard. But it was more alert than it looked, and always managed to keep a few inches ahead of his grasp.

"That's not the way to catch a lizard," said Teju,



appearing on the verandah steps. Teju and his sister Koki lived next door.

"You catch it, then," said Mukesh.

Teju fetched a stick from the garden, where it had been used to prop up sweet-peas. He used the stick to tip the lizard off the wall and into a shoe-box.

"You'll be my Head Keeper," said Mukesh, and soon he and Teju were at work in the back garden setting up enclosures with a roll of wire-netting they had found in the poultry shed.

"What else can we have in the zoo?" asked Teju. "We need more than a lizard."

"There's your grandmother's parrot," said Mukesh.

"That's a good idea. But we won't tell her about it — not yet. I don't think she'd lend it to us. You see, it's a

religious parrot. She's taught it lots of prayers and chants."

"Then people are sure to come and listen to it. They'll pay, too."

"We must have the parrot, then. What else?"

"Well, there's my dog," said Mukesh. "He's very fierce."

"But a dog isn't a zoo animal."

"Mine is — he's a *wild* dog. Look, he's black all over and he's got yellow eyes. There's no other dog like him."

Mukesh's dog, who spent most of his time sleeping on the verandah, raised his head and obligingly revealed his yellow eyes.

"He's got jaundice," said Teju.

"They've always been yellow."

"All right, then, we've got a lizard, a parrot and a black

dog with yellow eyes.”

“Koki has a white rabbit. Will she lend it to us?”

“I don’t know. She thinks a lot of her rabbit. Maybe we can *rent* it from her.”

“And there’s Sitaram’s donkey.”

Sitaram, the dhobi-boy, usually used a donkey to deliver and collect the laundry from the houses along this particular street.

“Do you really want a donkey?” asked Teju doubtfully.

“Why not? It’s a wild donkey. Haven’t you heard of them?”

“I’ve heard of a wild ass, but not a wild donkey.”

“Well, they’re all related to each other — asses, donkeys and mules.”

“Why don’t you paint black stripes on it and call it a zebra?”

“No, that’s cheating. It’s got to be a proper zoo. No tricks — it’s not a circus!”

On Saturday afternoon, a large placard with corrected spelling announced the opening of the zoo. It hung from the branches of the jack-fruit tree. Children were allowed in free but grown-ups had to buy tickets at fifty paise each, and Koki and Dolly were selling home-made tickets to the occasional passer-by or parent who happened to look in. Mukesh and his friends had worked hard at making notices for the various enclosures and each resident of the zoo was appropriately named.

The first attraction was a large packing-case filled with an assortment of house-lizards. They looked rather

sluggish, having been generously fed with a supply of beetles and other insects.

Then came an enclosure in which Koki’s white rabbit was on display. Freshly washed and brushed, it looked very cuddly and was praised by all.

Staring at it with evil intent from behind wire-netting was Mukesh’s dog — **RARE BLACK DOG WITH YELLOW EYES** read the notice. Those yellow eyes were now trying hard to hypnotise the pink eyes of Koki’s nervous rabbit. The dog pawed at the ground, trying to dig its way out from under the fence to get at the rabbit.

Tethered to a mango tree was a placard saying **WILD ASS FROM KUTCH**. A distant relative it may have been, but everyone recognised it as the local washerman’s beast of burden. Every now and then it tried to break loose, for it was long past its feeding time.

There was also a duck that did not seem to belong to anyone, and a small cow that had strayed in on its own; but the star attraction was the parrot. As it could recite three different prayers, over and over again, it was soon surrounded by a group of admiring parents, all of whom wished they had a parrot who could pray, or rather, do their praying for them. Oddly enough, Koki’s grandmother had chosen that day for visiting the temple, so she was unaware of the fuss that was being made of her pet, or even that it had been made an honorary member of the zoo. Teju had convinced himself she wouldn’t mind.

While Mukesh and Teju were escorting visitors around the zoo, lecturing them on wild dogs and wild asses, Koki

and Dolly were doing a brisk trade at the ticket counter. They had collected about ten rupees and were hoping for yet more, when there was a disturbance in the enclosures.

The black dog with yellow eyes had finally managed to dig his way out of his cage, and was now busy trying to dig his way *into* the rabbit's compartment. The rabbit was running round and round in panic-stricken circles. Meanwhile, the donkey had finally snapped the rope that held it and, braying loudly, scattered the spectators and made for home.

Koki went to the rescue of her rabbit and soon had it cradled in her arms. The dog now turned his attention to the duck. The duck flew over the packing-case, while the dog landed in it, scattering lizards in all directions.

In all this confusion, no one noticed that the door of the parrot's cage had slipped open. With a squawk and a whirr of wings, the bird shot out of the cage and flew off into a nearby orchard.

"The parrot's gone!" shouted Dolly, and almost immediately a silence fell upon the assembled visitors and children. Even the dog stopped barking. Granny's praying parrot had escaped! How could they possibly face her? Teju wondered if she would believe him if he told her it had flown off to heaven.

"Can anyone see it?" he asked tearfully.

"It's in a mango tree," said Dolly. "It won't come back."

The crowd fell away, unwilling to share any of the blame when Koki's grandmother came home and discovered

what had happened.

"What are we going to do now?" asked Teju, looking to Koki for help; but Koki was too upset to suggest anything. Mukesh had an idea.

"I know!" he said. "We'll get another one!"

"How?"

"Well, there's the ten rupees we've collected. We can buy a new parrot for ten rupees!"

"But won't Granny know the difference?" asked Teju.

"All these hill parrots look alike," said Mukesh.

So, taking the cage with them, they hurried off to the bazaar, where they soon found a bird-seller who was happy to sell them a parrot not unlike Granny's. He assured them it would talk.

"It *looks* like your grandmother's parrot," said Mukesh on the way home. "But can it pray?"

"Of course not," said Koki. "But we can teach it."

Koki's grandmother, who was short-sighted, did not notice the substitution; but she complained bitterly that the bird had stopped repeating its prayers and was instead making rude noises and even swearing occasionally.

Teju soon remedied this sad state of affairs.

Every morning he stood in front of the parrot's cage and repeated Granny's prayers. Within a few weeks the bird had learnt to repeat one of them. Granny was happy again — not only because her parrot had started praying once more, but because Teju had started praying too!

The Boy Who Broke the Bank

Nathu, the sweeper-boy, grumbled to himself as he swept the steps of a small local bank, owned for the most part by Seth Govind Ram, a man of wealth whose haphazard business dealings had often brought him to the verge of ruin. Nathu used the small broom hurriedly and carelessly; the dust, after rising in a cloud above his head, settled down again on the steps. As Nathu was banging his pan against a dustbin, Sitaram, the washerman's son, passed by.

Sitaram was on his delivery round. He had a bundle of pressed clothes balanced on his head.

"Don't raise such a dust!" he called out to Nathu. "Are you annoyed because they are still refusing to pay you another five rupees a month?"

"I don't want to talk about it," complained the sweeper-boy. "I haven't even received my regular pay. And this is the end of the month. Soon two months' pay will be due. Who would think this was a bank, holding up a poor man's salary? As soon as I get my money, I'm off! Not another week will I work in the place."

And Nathu banged his pan against the dustbin two or three times more, just to emphasise his point and give himself confidence.

"Well, I wish you luck," said Sitaram. "I'll be on the look-out for a new job for you." And he plodded barefoot along the road, the big bundle of clothes hiding most of his head and shoulders.

At the fourth house he visited, delivering the washing, Sitaram overheard the woman of the house saying how difficult it was to get someone to sweep the courtyard. Tying up his bundle, Sitaram said: "I know a sweeper-boy who's looking for work. He might be able to work for you from next month. He's with Seth Govind Ram's bank just now, but they are not giving him his pay, and he wants to leave."

"Oh, is that so?" said Mrs Prakash. "And why aren't they paying him?"

"They must be short of money," said Sitaram with a shrug.

Mrs Prakash laughed. "Well, tell him to come and see me when he's free."

Sitaram, glad that he had been of some service both to a friend and to a customer, hoisted his bag on his shoulders and went on his way.

Mrs Prakash had to do some shopping. She gave instructions to her maidservant with regard to the baby and told the cook what she wanted for lunch. Her husband worked for a large company, and they could keep servants and do things in style. Having given her orders, she set out for the bazaar to make her customary tour of the

cloth shops.

A large, shady tamarind tree grew near the clock tower, and it was here that Mrs Prakash found her friend, Mrs Bhushan, sheltering from the heat. Mrs Bhushan was fanning herself with a large peacock's feather. She complained that the summer was the hottest in the history of the town. She then showed Mrs Prakash a sample of the cloth she was going to buy, and for five minutes they discussed its shade, texture and design. When they had exhausted the subject, Mrs Prakash said:

"Do you know, my dear, Seth Govind Ram's bank can't even pay its employees. Only this morning I heard a complaint from their sweeper-boy, who hasn't received his pay for two months!"

"It's disgraceful!" exclaimed Mrs Bhushan. "If they can't pay their sweeper, they must be in a bad way. None of the others can be getting paid either."

She left Mrs Prakash at the tamarind tree and went in search of her husband, who was found sitting under the fan in Jugal Kishore's electrical goods shop, playing cards with the owner.

"So there you are!" cried Mrs Bhushan. "I've been looking for you for nearly an hour. Where did you disappear to?"

"Nowhere," replied Mr Bhushan. "Had you remained stationary in one shop, you might have found me. But you go from one to another, like a bee in a flower-garden."

"Now don't start grumbling. The heat is bad enough. I don't know what's happening to this town. Even the

bank is going bankrupt."

"What did you say?" said Mr Jugal Kishore, sitting up suddenly. "Which bank?"

"Why, Seth Govind Ram's bank, of course. I hear they've stopped paying their employees — no salary for over three months! Don't tell me you have an account with them, Mr Kishore?"

"No, but my neighbour has!" he said, and he called out to the keeper of the barber shop next door: "Faiz Hussain, have you heard the latest? Seth Govind Ram's bank is about to collapse! You'd better take your money out while there's still time."

Faiz Hussain, who was cutting the hair of an elderly gentleman, was so startled that his hand shook and he nicked his customer's ear. The customer yelped with pain and distress: pain, because of the cut, and distress, because of the awful news he had just heard. With one side of his neck still unshorn, he leapt out of his chair and sped across the road to a general merchant's store, where there was a telephone. He dialled Seth Govind Ram's number. The Seth was not at home. Where was he, then? The Seth was holidaying in Kashmir. Oh, was *that* so? The elderly gentleman did not believe it. He hurried back to the barber shop and told Faiz Hussain: "The bird has flown! Seth Govind Ram has left town. Definitely, it means a collapse. I'll have the rest of my haircut another time." And he dashed out of the shop and made a bee-line for his office and cheque book.

The news spread through the bazaar with the rapidity of a forest fire. From the general merchant's it travelled to the tea-shop, circulated amongst the customers, and then spread with them in various directions, to the paan-seller, the tailor, the fruit-vendor, the jeweller, the beggar sitting on the pavement ...

Old Ganpat, the beggar, had a crooked leg and had been squatting on the pavement for years, calling for alms. In the evening someone would come with a barrow and take him away. He had never been known to walk. But now, on learning that the bank was about to collapse, Ganpat astonished everyone by leaping to his feet and actually running at a good speed in the direction of the bank. It soon became known that he had well over a thousand rupees in savings.

Men stood in groups at street corners, discussing the situation. There hadn't been so much excitement since India last won a Test match. The small town in the foothills seldom had a crisis, never had floods or earthquakes or droughts. And so the imminent crash of the local bank set everyone talking and speculating and rushing about in a frenzy.

Some boasted of their farsightedness, congratulating themselves on having taken out their money, or on never putting any in. Others speculated on the reasons for the crash, putting it all down to Seth Govind Ram's pleasure-loving ways. The Seth had fled the state, said one. He had fled the country, said another. He had a South American passport, said a third. Others insisted that he was hiding somewhere in the town. And there was a rumour that he

had hanged himself from the tamarind tree, where he had been found that morning by the sweeper-boy.

Someone who had a relative working as a clerk in the bank decided to phone him and get the facts.

"I don't know anything about it," said the clerk, "except that half the town is here, trying to take their money out. Everyone seems to have gone mad!"

"There's a rumour that none of you have been paid."

"Well, all the clerks have had *theirs* salaries. We wouldn't be working otherwise. It may be that some of the part-time workers are getting paid late, but that isn't due to a shortage of money — only a few hundred rupees — it's just that the clerk who looks after their payments is on sick leave. You don't expect *me* to do his work, do you?" And he put the telephone down.

By afternoon the bank had gone through all its ready money, and the harassed manager was helpless. Emergency funds could only be obtained from one of the government banks, and now it was nearly closing time. He wasn't sure he could persuade the crowd outside to wait until the following morning. And Seth Govind Ram could be of no help from his luxury houseboat in Kashmir, five hundred miles away.

The clerks shut down their counters. But the people gathered outside on the steps of the bank, shouting: "We want our money!" "Give it to us today, or we'll break in!" "Fetch Seth Govind Ram, we know he's hiding in the vaults!"

Mischief-makers, who did not have a paisa in the bank, joined the crowd. The manager stood at the door and

tried to calm his angry customers. He declared that the bank had plenty of money, that they could withdraw all they wanted the following morning.

"We want it now!" chanted the people. "Now, now, now!"

A few stones were thrown, and the manager retreated indoors, closing the iron-grille gate.

A brick hurtled through the air and smashed into the plate-glass window which advertised the bank's assets.

Then the police arrived. They climbed the steps of the bank and, using their long sticks, pushed the crowd back until people began falling over each other. Gradually everyone dispersed, shouting that they would be back in the morning.

Nathu arrived next morning to sweep the steps of the bank.

He saw the refuse and the broken glass and the stones cluttering up the steps. Raising his hands in horror, he cried: "Goondas! Hooligans! May they suffer from a thousand ills! It was bad enough being paid irregularly — now I must suffer an increase of work!" He smote the steps with his broom, scattering the refuse.

"Good morning, Nathu," said Sitaram, the washerman's son, getting down from his bicycle. "Are you ready to take up a new job from the first of next month? You'll have to, I suppose, now that the bank is closing."

"What did you say?" said Nathu.

"Haven't you heard? The bank's gone bankrupt. You'd better hang around until the others arrive, and then start

demanding your money too. You'll be lucky if you get it!" He waved cheerfully, and pedalled away on his bicycle.

Nathu went back to sweeping the steps, muttering to himself. When he had finished, he sat down on the bottom step to await the arrival of the manager. He was determined to get his pay.

"Who would have thought the bank would collapse," he said to himself, and looked thoughtfully across the street. "I wonder how it could have happened ..."

Koki Plays the Game

“There’s a cricket match on Saturday, isn’t there?” asked Koki.

“That’s right,” said Ranji. “We’re playing the Public School team.”

“I might come and watch,” said Koki.

“As you like. It won’t be much of a game. We’ll beat them easily.”

Ranji’s own cricket team was quite different from his school team. It consisted of boys big and small, long and short, from various walks of life. Even Koki, a girl, was allowed honorary membership, and had sometimes been ‘twelfth man’ — an extra. She knew the game well, and often bowled to Ranji in the mornings when he wanted batting practice. Only a couple of the team members could afford to go to private schools like Ranji’s; most of them went to the local government school, and two or three had stopped going to school altogether.

There was Bhartu, who delivered newspapers in the mornings; the brothers Mukesh and Rakesh, whose father kept a sweet shop; and a tailor’s son, Amir Ali.

There was Billy Jones, an Anglo-Indian boy; ‘Lumboo’ — the Tall One; Sitaram, the washerman’s son, and several others. And there was also Bhim, who couldn’t play at all, but who made a good umpire (when his glasses weren’t steamed over) and who accompanied the team wherever it went.

This Saturday they were playing on their ‘home’ ground, a patch of wasteland behind a new cinema called the *Apsara* (‘Heavenly Dancer’).

The Public School boys had all arrived first, which was only natural since they lived together in the same boarding school. The members of Ranji’s team came from different directions, so it was some time before they had all assembled. Even then they were two short. But Ranji won the toss and decided to bat, hoping that the missing team members would arrive in time to take their turn at the wicket.

“If Mukesh and Rakesh aren’t here in time, we won’t have them in the team,” said Ranji sternly.

“Don’t sack them,” said Lumboo. “They always bring us sweets and snacks from their father’s shop. We need them in the team even if they don’t score any runs.”

“Well, if they turn up *without* refreshments, they’ll be sacked,” said Ranji, always ready to be fair.

The two umpires had gone out to set up the stumps — Bhim, on behalf of Ranji’s team, and a teacher from the Public School.

“I don’t like the look of that teacher,” said Amir Ali.

“Well, we won’t take any risks.”

Billy Jones and Lumboo always opened the batting.

Lumboo's height helped him to deal with the fast-rising ball. He took the first ball.

The Public School's opening bowler was speedy but inaccurate. This was because he was trying to bowl too fast. His first ball went for a wide, which gave Ranji's team its first run. The second ball wasn't quite so wide, but it was still about a foot from the leg stump. Lumboo took a swipe at it and missed. The third ball pitched half-way down the wicket and kept low. It struck Lumboo on the pads.

"How's that!" shouted the bowler, wicket-keeper and slip-fielders in unison.

The Public School's umpire did not hesitate. Up went his finger. Lumboo was given out leg-before-wicket.

Lumboo stood aghast. He looked down at where his feet were placed, then back at his stumps.

"I'm not in front of the wicket," he complained to no one in particular.

"The umpire's word is law," said the wicket-keeper.

Lumboo slowly walked back to where his teammates reclined against a pile of bricks.

"I wasn't out!" he protested.

"Never mind," said Ranji, whose turn it was to bat. "You'll get your chance when you come on to bowl."

He walked to the wicket with a confident air, his bat resting on his shoulder. He took guard carefully and, tapping his bat on the ground, faced the bowler. He received a straight ball, fast, and met it on the half-volley, driving it straight back past the bowler. It sped to the boundary, amidst delighted cries from Ranji's team-

mates. Four runs.

The next ball was short, just outside the off-stump. Ranji stepped back and square-cut it past point. Another four. There were more cheers, and this time Ranji distinctly heard a girl's voice shouting: "Good shot, Ranji!"

He looked back to where his teammates were gathered. There was no girl among them. He turned and looked towards the opposite boundary, and there, under the giant cinema hoarding, stood Koki. She waved to him.

Ranji did not wave back. He felt acutely self-conscious. Settling down to face the bowler again, he was aware of two things at once — of the bowler making faces and charging up to bowl, and of Koki standing on the boundary and waiting for him to hit another four. This loss of concentration caused him to misjudge the next ball. Instead of playing forward, he played back. The ball took the edge of his bat and flew straight into the wicket-keeper's gloves.

"How's that!" shouted all the fielders, appealing for a catch.

Ranji did not wait for the umpire — in this case, Bhim — to give him out. He knew he'd touched the ball. Scowling, he walked back to his team. It was all Koki's fault!

Now there was a good partnership between Sitaram and Bhartu. Sitaram, who helped his father with the town's washing on Sundays, was in the habit of laying out clothes on a flat stone and pounding them with a stout stick — the method followed by most washermen. He dealt with the cricket-ball in much the same way — clouting it hard, and



sending it to various points of the compass. He hit up twenty-five valuable runs before he was out, caught off a big hit. Bhartu pushed and prodded, merely keeping one end going, until he too was out to an LBW decision. Billy Jones had gone the same way, taking the ball on his pads. No one was happy with the LBW decisions.

"We must have neutral umpires," said Amir Ali.

"But who wants to be an umpire?" said Ranji. "We won't find anyone. We'll have to use our own team members — or let the other side provide *both* umpires!"

"Not after today," said Lumboo.

Meanwhile, Mukesh and Rakesh had arrived, carrying paper-bags full of samosas and jalebis. As a result, everyone cheered up. Wickets fell almost as rapidly as the snacks and sweets were consumed. Mukesh and Rakesh, who were the last men in, held out for several overs until Rakesh was given out — not really a match-winning score, except on a tricky wicket.

It was the Public School team's turn to bat. One of their opening batsmen was bowled by Lumboo for nought. The other batsman was twice rapped on the pads by balls from Ranji, but his loud appeals for LBW were turned down — by the Public School's umpire, naturally! Muttering to himself, Ranji hurled down a thunderbolt of a ball. It rose sharply and struck the batsman on the hand. Howling with pain, he dropped his bat and wrung his hand. Then he showed everyone a swollen finger and decided to 'retire hurt'.

"There's more than one way of getting them out," muttered Ranji, as he passed the umpire.

The next two batsmen were good players, not as nervous as the openers. One of them got what might have been a faint tickle to an out-swing from Lumboo, but he was given the benefit of the doubt by Bhim — who, as umpires went, was as impartial as a star. He showed no favours to his own team, no matter what the other umpire did. It just isn't fair, thought Ranji.

The number three and four batsmen put on forty runs between them, and by mid-afternoon Ranji's players were feeling tired and hungry. Then three quick wickets fell to Sitaram's spinners. Three wickets remained, and twenty runs were needed by the Public School for victory.

This was when Bhartu, running to take a catch, collided with chubby Mukesh. Both of them went sprawling on the grass, and when they got up the ball was found lodged in the back of Mukesh's pants. How it got there no one could tell, but after much discussion the umpires had to agree that it qualified as a catch and the batsman was given out. But Bhartu had to leave the ground with a bleeding nose.

Ranji looked around for a replacement. There was no one in sight except Koki.

"Come and field," said Ranji brusquely.

Koki needed no persuading. She slipped off her sandals and dashed barefoot on to the field, taking up Bhartu's position near the boundary.

The tail-end batsmen were now swinging at the ball in a desperate attempt to hit off the remaining runs. A hard-hit drive sped past Koki and went for four runs. Ranji gave her a hard look. Then the two batsmen got into a muddle

while trying to take a quick run, and one of them was run out.

The last man came in. The Public School was eight runs behind. But a couple of boundaries would take care of that.

The batsmen ran two. And then one of them, overconfident and sure of victory, swung out at a slow, tempting ball from Sitaram, and the ball flew towards Koki in a long, curving arc.

Koki had to run a few yards to her left. Then she leapt like a gazelle and took the ball in both hands.

Ranji's team had won, and Koki had made the winning catch.

It was her last appearance as 'twelfth man'. From that day onwards she was a regular member of the team.

Home

"The boy's useless," said Mr Kapoor, speaking to his wife but making sure his son could hear. "I don't know what he'll do with himself when he grows up. He takes no interest in his studies."

Suraj's father had returned from a business trip and was seeing his son's school report for the first time.

"Good at cricket," said the report. "Poor in studies. Does not pay attention in class."

Suraj's mother, a quiet, dignified woman, said nothing. Suraj stood at the window, refusing to speak. He stared out at the light drizzle that whispered across the garden. He had angry black eyes and bushy eyebrows, and he was feeling rebellious.

His father was doing all the talking. "What's the use of spending money on his education if he can't show anything for it? He comes home, eats as much as three boys, asks for money, and then goes out to loaf with his friends!"

Mr Kapoor paused, expecting Suraj to reply and give cause for further scolding; but Suraj knew that silence

would irritate his father even more, and there were times when he enjoyed watching his father get irritated.

"Well, I won't stand for it," said Mr Kapoor finally.

"If you don't make some effort, my boy, you can leave this house!" And having at last addressed Suraj directly, he stormed out of the room.

Suraj remained a few moments at the window. Then he went to the front door, opened it, stepped out into the rain, and banged the door behind him.

His mother made as if to call out after him, but she thought better of it, and turned and walked into the kitchen.

Suraj stood in the drizzle, looking back at the house.

"I'll never go back," he said fiercely. "I can manage without them. If they want me back, they can come and *ask* me to return!"

And he thrust his hands into his pockets and walked down the road with an independent air.

His fingers came into contact with a familiar crispness, a five-rupee note. It was all the money he had in the world. He clutched it tight. He had meant to spend it at the cinema, but now it would have to serve more urgent needs. He wasn't sure what these needs would be because just now he was angry and his mind wasn't running on practical lines. He walked blindly, unconscious of the rain, until he reached the maidaan.

When he reached the maidaan, the sun came out.

Though there was still a drizzle, the sun seemed to raise Suraj's spirits at once. He remembered his friend Ranji and decided he would stay with Ranji until he found some

sort of work. He knew that if he didn't find work, he wouldn't be able to stay away from home for long. He wondered what kind of work a thirteen-year-old could get. He did not fancy delivering newspapers or serving tea in a small teashop in the bazaar; it was much better being a customer.

The drizzle ceased altogether, and Suraj hurried across the maidaan and down a quiet road until he reached Ranji's house. When he went in at the gate, his spirits sank.

The house was shut. There was a lock on the front door. Suraj went round the house three times but he couldn't find an open door or window. Perhaps, he thought, the family have gone out for the morning — a picnic or birthday treat; they were sure to be back for lunch. With spirits mounting once again, he strolled leisurely down the road, in the direction of the bazaar.

Suraj had a weakness for the bazaar, for its crowded variety of goods, its smells and colours and the music playing over the loudspeakers. He lingered now at a tea-and-pakora shop, tempted by the appetising smells that came from inside; but decided that he would eat at Ranji's house and spend his money on something other than food. He couldn't resist the big yellow yo-yo in the toy-seller's glass case; it was set with pieces of different coloured glass which shone and twinkled in the sunshine.

"How much?" asked Suraj.

"Two rupees," said the shopkeeper. "But to a regular customer like you I give it for one rupee."

"It must be an old one," said Suraj, but he paid the

rupee and took possession of the yo-yo. He immediately began working it, strolling through the bazaar with the yo-yo swinging up and down from his index finger.

Fingering the four remaining notes in his pocket, he decided that he was thirsty. Not tap-water, nor a fizzy drink, but only a vanilla milk-shake would meet his need. He sat at a table and sucked milk-shake through a straw. One eye caught sight of the clock on the wall. It was nearly one o'clock. Ranji and his family should be home by now.

Suraj slipped off his chair, paid for the drink — that left him with two rupees — and went sauntering down the bazaar road, the yo-yo making soothing sounds beside him.

Ranji's house was still shut.

This was something Suraj hadn't anticipated. He walked quickly round the house, but it was locked as before. On his second round he met the gardener, an old man over sixty.

"Where is everybody?" asked Suraj.

"They have gone to Delhi for a week," said the gardener, looking sharply at Suraj. "Why, is anything the matter?"

Suraj had never seen the old man before, but he did not hesitate to confide in him. "I've left home. I was going to stay with Ranji. Now there's nowhere to go."

The old man thought this over for a minute. His face was wrinkled like a walnut, his hands and feet hard and cracked; but his eyes were bright and almost youthful. He was a part-time gardener, who worked for several families along the road; there were no big gardens in this part of

the town.

"Why don't you go home again?" he suggested.

"It's too soon," said Suraj. "I haven't really run away as yet. They must *know* I've run away. Then they'll feel sorry!"

The gardener smiled. "You should have planned it better," he said. "Have you saved any money?"

"I had five rupees this morning. Now there are two rupees left." He looked down at his yo-yo. "Would you like to buy it?"

"I wouldn't know how to work it," said the gardener. "The best thing for you to do is to go home, wait till Ranji gets back, and *then* run away."

Suraj considered this interesting advice, and decided that there was something in it. But he didn't make up his mind right away. A little suspense at home would be a good thing for his parents.

He returned to the maidaan and sat down on the grass. As soon as he sat down, he felt hungry.

He had never felt so hungry before. Visions of tandoori chickens and dripping spangled sweets danced before him. He wondered if the toy-seller would take back the yo-yo. He probably would, for half the price; but, as much as Suraj wanted food, he did not want to give up the yo-yo.

There was nothing to do but go home. His mother, he was sure, would be worried by now. His father (he hoped) would be pacing up and down the verandah, glancing at his watch every few seconds. It would be a lesson to them. He would walk back into the house as if doing them a favour.

He only hoped they had kept his lunch.

Suraj walked into the sitting-room and threw his yo-yo on the sofa.

Mr Kapoor was sitting in his favourite armchair, reading a newspaper prior to going back to his office. He stood up for a moment as Suraj came into the room, said "You're very late," and returned to his newspaper.

Suraj found his mother and his food in the kitchen. She did not speak to him, but was smiling to herself.

"Feeling hungry?" she asked.

"No," said Suraj, and seized the tray and tucked into his food.

When he returned to the sitting-room he was surprised to see his father fumbling with the yo-yo.

"How do you work this stupid thing?" said Mr Kapoor.

Suraj didn't reply. He just stood there gloating over his father's clumsiness. At last he couldn't help bursting into laughter.

"It's easy," he said. "I'll show you." And he took the yo-yo from his father and gave a demonstration.

When Mrs Kapoor came into the room she did not appear at all surprised to find her husband and son deeply absorbed in the working of a cheap bazaar toy. She was used to such absurdities. Men never really grew up.

Mr Kapoor had forgotten he was supposed to be returning to his office, and Suraj had forgotten about running away. They had both forgotten the morning's unpleasantness. That had been a long, long time ago.

The Visitor

Amir was sitting on his bed, staring out of the door that opened out onto the roof. The bald mynah bird stared back at him. Then he heard someone calling from downstairs.

"Does anyone live up there?"

"No," shouted Amir. "Nobody lives up here."

"Then can I come up?" asked the person below.

Amir didn't answer. Presently he heard footsteps coming up. The mynah bird flew off the roof and settled in a mango tree.

A boy stood in the doorway, smiling at Amir. He was a little taller than Amir, and much thinner. He wore a white shirt outside striped pyjamas. On his feet were open slippers. A tray hung from his shoulders, filled with an assortment of goods.

"Would you like to buy something?" he asked.

In his tray were combs, buttons, reels of thread, shoelaces, little vials of cheap perfume.

"I have everything you need," he said.

"I don't need anything," said Amir.

"You need buttons."

"I don't."

"Your top button is missing."

Amir felt for the top button of his shirt and was surprised to find it missing.

"I don't like buttoning my shirt," he said.

"That's different," said his visitor, and looked him up and down for further signs of wear and tear. "You'd better buy a new pair of shoelaces."

Amir looked down at his shoes and said, "I've got laces."

"Very poor quality," said the boy, and taking hold of one of the laces, he tugged at it and snapped it in two. "See how easily it breaks? Now you need laces."

"Well, I'm not buying any," said Amir.

The boy sighed, shrugged, and moved towards the door. As he walked slowly down the steps, Amir stood in the doorway, watching him go. On an impulse, he called out, "What's your name?"

"Mohan," replied the boy.

"Well, come again in a week," said Amir. "I may need something then."

Amir went downstairs for his lunch. He returned to his room to study, but dozed off instead. Towards evening he felt hungry and restless. He could not remain in his room when everyone else was pouring into the streets to shop and talk and eat and visit the cinema.

From the roof he could see the bazaar lights coming on, and hear the jingle of tonga bells and the blare of bus

horns. It was a cool evening and he put on his coat before going downstairs.

It was not easy to walk fast on the road to the bazaar. Apart from the great number of pedestrians, there were cyclists and scooter-rickshaws, handcarts and cows, all making movement difficult. A little tea-shop played film music over a loudspeaker, adding noise to the general confusion.

The balloon-man was having a trying time. He was surrounded by a swarm of children who were more intent on bursting his balloons than on buying any. One or two got loose and went sailing over the heads of the crowd to burst over the fire in the chaat shop.

Amir stood outside the chaat shop and ate a variety of spicy snacks. Then he wiped his fingers on the banana leaves on which he had been served, and moved on down the bazaar road.

Towards the clock tower the road grew wider and less crowded. There was a street lamp at the corner of the road. A boy was sitting on the pavement beneath the lamp, bent over a book, absorbed in what he was reading. He seemed not to notice the noise of the bazaar or the chill in the air. As Amir came nearer, he saw that the boy was Mohan.

He did not know whether to stop and talk to him, or carry on down the road. After walking some distance, he felt ashamed at not having stopped to greet the boy, so he turned and retraced his steps. But when he came to the lamp-post, Mohan had gone.

*

When Mohan came again he did not call out from below but came straight up to the room. He looked at Amir's shirt and shoes and saw that one of the shoes was still done up with half a lace. With an air of triumph he dropped a pair of shoelaces on the desk.

"I can't pay for them now," said Amir.

"You can pay me later."

Amir sat on the edge of his table while Mohan leant against the wall.

"Do you go to school?" asked Amir.

"Sometimes I go to evening classes," Mohan said. "I am sitting privately for my High School exams next month. If I pass..."

He stopped to think about the things he could do if he passed. The way to a career would be open to him, he could study further, become an engineer, or a scientist or an administrator. No more selling combs and buttons at street corners...

"Where are your parents?" asked Amir.

"My father is dead. My mother is in our village in the hills. I have brothers and sisters at home, but I am the only one old enough to work."

"Then where do you stay?"

"Anywhere. On somebody's verandah, or on the maidan; it doesn't matter much in the summer. These days I sleep on the station platform. It's quite warm there."

"You can sleep here," said Amir.

One morning, when he opened the door of his room, Amir found Mohan asleep at the top of the steps. He had

wrapped himself up in a thin blanket. His tray of merchandise lay a short distance away.

Amir shook him gently and he woke up immediately, blinking in the bright sunlight.

"Why didn't you come in?" asked Amir. "Why didn't you let me know you were here?"

"It was late," said Mohan. "I did not want to wake you. Besides, it was a fine night, not too cold."

"Someone could have stolen your things."

Amir made Mohan promise to sleep in the room that night. He came quite early. Amir lent him another blanket, and he lay down on the floor-mat and slept soundly, while Amir stayed awake worrying if his guest was comfortable enough.

Mohan came quite often, leaving early in the morning before Amir could offer him a meal. He ate at little places in the bazaar.

The High School exams were nearing, and Mohan sat up late with his books. Apart from his occasional evening classes, he received no teaching.

The exams lasted for ten days, and during this time Mohan put aside his tray of odds and ends. He did his papers with confidence. He thought he had done rather well. And when it was over, he took up his tray again and walked all over the town, trying to make up for lost sales.

On the day the exam results were due, Amir rose early. He got to the news agency at five o'clock, just as the morning papers arrived. Bhartu gave him a paper to look at and he found the page on which the results were listed.

He looked down the 'passes' column for the town, but couldn't find Mohan's number on the list. He looked twice to make sure, and then returned the paper to Bhartu with a glum look.

"Failed?" said Bhartu.

Amir nodded and turned away. When he returned to the room, he found Mohan sitting at the top of the steps. He didn't have to tell him anything. Mohan knew by the look on the other's face.

Amir sat down beside him, and they said nothing for a while.

"Never mind," said Mohan. "I'll pass next year." It seemed that Amir was more in need of comforting than himself.

"If only you'd had more time," said Amir.

"I have plenty of time now. Another year... Can I still stay in your room?"

"For as long as it's my room. That means I shall have to work too, otherwise my grandfather will drag me downstairs again."

Mohan laughed and went into the room. When he came out, the tray was hanging from his shoulders.

"What would you like to buy?" he asked. "I have everything you need."

Mukesh Keeps a Goat

Mukesh's favourite pet was the little black goat who followed him home from the mustard fields one day.

Each year, before the monsoon rains came, the little Song River outside Dehra was just a narrow stream. Mukesh liked wading across it and then wandering through the fields and tea gardens on the other side, watching the men moving about among the yellow mustard and the women in their bright red saris picking tea.

He had been sitting on the bank of a small irrigation canal, gazing at a couple of herons fishing in the muddy water, when he felt something bump his elbow. Looking around, he found at his side a little goat, jet black and soft as velvet, with lovely grey eyes. Neither her owner nor her mother was around.

She continued to nudge Mukesh, so he looked in his pockets for nourishment and, finding the remains of a samosa, held it out to her. She ate it eagerly, then sat down beside him and began nibbling at the grass.

A little later, when Mukesh got up to leave, the goat rose too. And when he started walking home, she fol-

lowed unsteadily, her thin legs taking her this way and that.

"Go home!" said Mukesh as she danced around him. But it was clear that she had forgotten the way home, because she followed him to the river-bed. It was obvious that her trembling legs would not stand up to the current, so he took her in his arms and carried her across the stream. When he set her down, she remained by his side, rubbing against his legs.

Mukesh set out for home at a brisk pace, feeling sure that he would soon leave the little goat behind. But her legs were stronger than he had supposed. She came hopping along, right up to the gate of the house.

There was nothing he could do but carry her in and present her to his parents. "She's my friend," he announced.

"Not another pet!" said his mother when she saw the goat on the verandah, lapping a saucer of milk. "I've told you again and again that I will not have any animals in or around the house!"

It was easy to understand his mother's objections. Only a few weeks previously Mukesh had started his own zoo in the back garden. As a result, their neighbours' parrot, borrowed and put on display, had escaped; the washerman's donkey had gone missing for two days; and Mukesh's mother had found her kitchen full of fleeing lizards.

"And besides," she said, "your dog won't be happy with a goat in the house."

But Mukesh's black dog (with yellow eyes) merely

looked up from the bone he was gnawing at the other end of the verandah, and paid no attention to the newcomer. There would be no competition from a grass-eater who could not dig for bones!

"Goat's milk is good for your health," said Mukesh. "I read about it somewhere. That's why I brought her home. You haven't been looking well this week, Mother."

The prospect of an eventual supply of free milk tilted the decision in favour of keeping the goat, even though they knew it would be some time before it would provide any. Mukesh's little sister Dolly did not think highly of the new pet. "It *smells*," was all she said, when asked her opinion. So Mukesh gave his pet a liberal sprinkling of his mother's jasmine perfume, with the result that she reeked of perfume for a week.

But there was something fairy-like about the little goat, and Mukesh named her Pari, meaning 'fairy'. She skipped about very daintily, and her feet seemed equipped with springs when she leaped around the small lawn. To make the name even more fitting, Mukesh tied a little bell to her neck so he'd always know by its fairy tinkling where she was.

She loved an early-morning walk and was in many ways as good or even a better companion than a dog: she did not wander off on her own or get into quarrels with cows, cats, stray dogs, or porcupines. The only things she chased were butterflies, and she would tumble into ditches and slither down slopes in her eagerness to follow them.

But unlike fairies, who never grow up, Mukesh's Pari

had to grow up, and she soon developed a neat little pair of horns. Her appetite began to increase, too. She loved the leaves and flowers of the sweet-pea, the nasturtium and the geranium. These were also Mukesh's father's favourite garden flowers! It was he, rather than Mukesh's mother, who loved growing flowers, and every year his sweet-peas won prizes at the annual Flower Show.

One morning he found most of his sweet-peas destroyed. Hastily Mukesh blamed a cow, suggesting that it had got into the garden during the night. His father made no comment, but gave him a look that suggested he knew just who the culprit was; it was obvious that he bitterly regretted having allowed Mukesh to keep the goat. By the time the Flower Show came around, he had only his zinnias left — apparently the goat disliked zinnias — and they won third prize. Mukesh took care to keep the goat well out of his father's sight.

Of course, trouble, just like unseasonal rain, came when Mukesh was least expecting it.

Pari, having discovered various uses to which she could put her horns, began trying them out at almost every opportunity. A part-time gardener, who had never been known to grumble, came to Mukesh's mother to complain that he had been bending over the sweet-pea bed, putting it right again, when the goat had come up quietly and butted him from behind. He refused to work in the garden unless Pari was tied up.

"And by the way," said Mukesh's mother to her son, after she had been calmed down, "when are we going to have that milk we were promised?"

It wasn't long before the postman, the fruit-seller and the newspaper boy all had complaints to make. They dared not turn their backs on the playful young goat.

Events reached a climax during the visit of one of Mukesh's aunts. Chachi (his uncle's wife) was in a habit of bending over flower-pots and holding brief conversations with the flowers. She said it helped them grow faster.

She was poised over a pot, talking to a geranium, when the goat, suspecting that Chachi was eating the leaves, decided to butt this intruder out of the way of her favourite snack.

Chachi did not take kindly to being pushed off the verandah. She insisted that she had been badly bruised, though she refused all offers of first-aid from Mukesh.

It was the end of the goat's comfortable stay with the family. Mukesh's father asked Nathu, the newspaper boy, to take her straight to the bazaar and sell her at any price to the first customer that came along.

Mukesh stood at the gate and watched his Pari being led away. She kept looking back and bleating, probably wondering why Mukesh was not accompanying her on this particular walk.

Nathu gave Mukesh a smile and a wink, as if to suggest that all would be well. Nathu had worked as a cleaner at a local co-op bank before it had collapsed; now he sold newspapers; but his 'banking experience', as he put it, had made him a good judge of a promising investment. When he came back from the bazaar, he announced that the goat had been sold, and handed Mukesh's father a

fifty-rupee note. But later, when he was alone with Mukesh, he told him that he had bought the goat himself, and that Mukesh could come and see her from time to time in her new home behind the bazaar.

Mukesh did visit her sometimes. And in due course he found her with a little kid. Pari had also become a good provider of milk, and Nathu and his small brothers and sisters were great milk drinkers. She was on good terms with everyone in the family and only butted strangers who bowed too low when entering or leaving by the small courtyard door.

Koki's Song

When Koki was nearly twelve, she and her mother went to spend part of the year with Koki's maternal grandmother who lived in a lonely old house near the river-bed. Her mother was busy all day, cooking and washing clothes, while her grandmother, a round, bouncy little woman, would sit in the sun recounting stories from her own childhood.

Koki would spend the morning helping her mother and the afternoons talking to her grandmother. Towards evening the old lady would go indoors, and then Koki would be on her own in the large garden.

The garden had not been looked after too well, and it was over-run with semi-wild marigolds, nasturtiums and roses. Koki liked it this way because she could wander about discovering flowers emerging from tall grass and thistles. A wall went round the garden, and on the other side of the wall a stretch of grassland went sloping down to the river-bed. A shallow stream ran along the middle of this otherwise dry watercourse. During the monsoon rains it was a rushing torrent, but just now it was a

murmuring brook, with little silver fish darting about in the water.

Koki seldom went beyond the garden wall because across the river-bed was jungle, and wild animals frequently came down to the water to drink. The wild boar, who were often seen, frightened her. But once she saw a deer, quite close, moving about with supple grace and dignity. It was a chital, a spotted deer. Koki stared at the animal in fascination, and the deer must have become conscious of her gaze, for it looked up and stared back at Koki. What the deer saw was a small dark face, half-hidden by a lot of loose black hair, and two large brown eyes shining with wonder.

The deer and the girl stared at each other for two or three minutes, then somewhere a twig snapped and the startled deer went bounding away across the stream.

One evening Koki heard the distant music of a flute. She had not heard it before, and she looked over the wall to see where it came from.

A boy sat near the stream, playing on a flute, while his small herd of cows grazed on the slopes. He had a thin shawl thrown over his shoulders, his feet were bare, and his clothes dusty and torn. But Koki did not notice these things; she was enthralled by the simple, plaintive melody of the flute and, for her, the boy was a prince who made beautiful music.

She climbed up on the wall and sat there with her legs dangling over the other side. When the boy looked up and saw her, he rose and came nearer. He sat down on the grass about twenty metres from the wall, put the flute

to his lips again and, with his eyes on Koki, continued his playing.

It reminded Koki of the day she and the deer had stared at each other, both fascinated, neither of them stirring or making a sound; only now it was for a much longer time, and one played while the other listened.

Next evening, Koki heard the flute again and was soon sitting astride the wall. When the boy saw Koki, he put down his flute and smiled at her, and then began playing again. That evening, besides playing and listening, all they did was smile at each other.

On the third evening Koki asked the boy his name. "Somi," he said, and he played on the flute and did not say another word.

But on the fourth evening he asked Koki her name, and she told him.

"I will make a song about you," he said, and he played the sweetest melody Koki had ever heard. She found herself putting words to it and singing softly:

"When you are far away,
I'll sing this song,
And in my heart you'll play
All summer long."

After that, Somi always played Koki's song.

It wasn't long before Koki came down from the wall, and sometimes she and Somi would walk up the river-bed and paddle in the cold mountain water. They never said much to each other, and yet a lot seemed to have been said. Somi would leave at dusk, herding the cattle before him, calling each by a different name, and Koki would

watch him go until he was a speck on the dusty road and the cow-bells tinkled distantly. She never knew where he came from or where he went. She thought she might ask him some day, but it didn't seem necessary.

One day Somi did not play the flute. Instead he put it in Koki's hands and said, "Keep it for me, I am going away for some time. To the summer pastures in the hills." He had come without his herd that day and, after he had given Koki the flute, he turned and ran fleet-footed across the grass that was now turning from green to brown.

Koki missed the boy, but she still had the flute. She tried playing on it sometimes, but she did not have the magic touch and all she achieved was a shrill, broken piping. But sometimes, when she was walking by herself along the dry river-bed, she thought she heard the music, sweet and low and all around her. She did not sing her song. She had made the words for Somi, and she would sing them for Somi when he returned — if ever he returned...

At night, when she lay awake, the flute seemed to play her song. It was as though the flute was actually playing by itself.

One day when Koki was at the river-bed, ankle-deep in water, the flute fell from her hands. It was carried into the middle of the stream and swept away. Koki ran downstream, splashing through the water, stumbling frequently and wetting her clothes. She could see the flute bobbing up and down on the water, but it was getting further and further away, and soon she had to stop

running because she was tired and far from home.

The flute was lost, and she did not hear its music any more.

Koki became quiet and listless. Grandmother complained that she could no longer interest the girl in her stories, so Koki tried hard to listen and pay attention, but her mind was always wandering to other things. No one really knew the reason for Koki's unhappiness; even Koki wasn't sure. Grandmother had of course seen Koki and the boy talking to each other but did not realise the strength of the bond between them.

Koki saw the deer once, when it came to the stream to drink. She was sitting on the wall, and the deer took one look at her and was so startled that it went bounding away into the forest.

And so another month passed. The mountain snows melted and the swollen stream came rushing down the valley and past the lonely old house. The garden was full of little green shoots, the grass was fresh and sweet, and the flame-tree was bursting into colour. Koki had grown a little taller, too.

She sat under a mango tree, watching the sunlight stalk the shadows on the wall. A couple of bulbuls were twittering away in a rose bush. Grandmother had told Koki that birds sang because they were happy, but what proof was there of that, Koki wondered? For all she knew, birds could just as well be singing because they felt miserable.

And then, as though accompanying the song of the birds, came the music of a flute.

Koki heard it, and looked up and listened. There was no mistaking the melody. It was Koki's song. She pulled herself up on the wall and looked over.

Somi sat on the grass, playing a new flute, but looking as though he had been sitting there for ages. When he saw Koki, he put down his flute and smiled, and then began playing again.

That evening they walked together down to the edge of the stream, and she noticed that the herd was larger than before. Somi was wearing new clothes. He told her about the lush mountain meadow where he had taken the herd for the dry month; she told him that she would soon be returning to her school and home in the nearby town.

"Will you come again?" he asked.

"At the end of every month," she said. "My grandmother says I must come." But she knew that wasn't the only reason.

"I'll be here," said Somi simply, and played her song. And Koki sang to his music.

The Great Train Journey

Suraj waved to a passing train, and kept waving until only the spiralling smoke remained. He liked waving to trains. He wondered about the people in them, and about where they were going and what it would be like there. And when the train had passed, leaving behind only the hot, empty track, Suraj was lonely.

He was a little lonely now. His hands in his pockets, he wandered along the railway track, kicking at loose pebbles and sending them down the bank. Soon there were other tracks, a railway-siding, a stationary goods train.

Suraj walked the length of the goods train. The carriage doors were closed and, as there were no windows, he couldn't see inside. He looked around to see if he was observed, and then, satisfied that he was alone, began trying the doors. He was almost at the end of the train when a carriage door gave way to his thrust.

It was dark inside the carriage. Suraj stood outside in the bright sunlight, peering into the darkness, trying to recognise bulky, shapeless objects. He stepped into the carriage and felt around. The objects were crates, and

through the cross-section of woodwork he felt straw. He opened the other door and the sun streamed into the compartment, driving out the musty darkness.

Suraj sat down on a packing-case, his chin cupped in his hands. The school was closed for the summer holidays, and he had been wandering about all day and still did not know what to do with himself. The carriage was bare of any sort of glamour. Passing trains fascinated him — moving trains, crowded trains, shrieking, panting trains all fascinated him — but this smelly, dark compartment filled him only with gloom and more loneliness.

He did not really look gloomy or lonely. He looked fierce at times, when he glared out at people from under his dark eyebrows, but otherwise he usually wore a contented look — and no one could guess just how deep his thoughts were!

Perhaps, if he had company, some fun could be had in the carriage. If there had been a friend with him, someone like Ranji

He looked at the crates. He was always curious about things that were bolted or nailed down or in some way concealed from him — things like parcels and locked rooms — and carriage doors and crates!

He went from one crate to another, and soon his perseverance was rewarded. The cover of one hadn't been properly nailed down. Suraj got his fingers under the edge and prised up the lid. Absorbed in this operation, he did not notice the slight shudder that passed through the train.

He plunged his hands into the straw and pulled out

an apple.

It was a dark, ruby-red apple, and it lay in the dusty palm of Suraj's hand like some gigantic precious stone, smooth and round and glowing in the sunlight. Suraj looked up, out of the doorway, and thought he saw a tree walking past the train.

He dropped the apple and stared.

There was another tree, and another, all walking past the door with increasing rapidity. Suraj stepped forward but lost his balance and fell on his hands and knees. The floor beneath him was vibrating, the wheels were clattering on the rails, the carriage was swaying. The trees were running now, swooping past the train, and the telegraph poles joined them in the crazy race.

Crouching on his hands and knees, Suraj stared out of the open door and realised that the train was moving, moving fast, moving away from his home and puffing into the unknown. He crept cautiously to the door and looked out. The ground seemed to rush away from the wheels. He couldn't jump. Was there, he wondered, any way of stopping the train? He looked around the compartment again: only crates of apples. He wouldn't starve, that was one consolation.

He picked up the apple he had dropped and pulled a crate nearer to the doorway. Sitting down, he took a bite from the apple and stared out of the open door.

"Greetings, friend," said a voice from behind, and Suraj spun round guiltily, his mouth full of apple.

A dirty, bearded face was looking out at him from behind a pile of crates. The mouth was open in a wide,

paan-stained grin.

"Er — namaste," said Suraj apprehensively. "Who are you?"

The man stepped out from behind the crates and confronted the boy.

"I'll have one of those, too," he said, pointing to the apple.

Suraj gave the man an apple, and stood his ground while the carriage rocked on the rails. The man took a step forward, lost his balance, and sat down on the floor.

"And where are you going, friend?" he asked. "Have you a ticket?"

"No," said Suraj. "Have you?"

The man pulled at his beard and mused upon the question but did not answer it. He took a bite from the apple and said, "No, I don't have a ticket. But I usually reserve this compartment for myself. This is the first time I've had company. Where are you going? Are you a hippy like me?"

"I don't know," said Suraj. "Where does this train go?"

The scruffy ticketless traveller looked concerned for a moment, then smiled and said, "Where do you want to go?"

"I want to go everywhere," said Suraj. "I want to go to England and China and Africa and Greenland. I want to go all over the world!"

"Then you're on the right train," said the man. "This train goes everywhere. First it will take you to the sea, and there you will have to get on a ship if you want to go to China."

"How do I get on a ship?" asked Suraj.

The man, who had been fumbling about in the folds and pocket of his shabby clothes, produced a packet of bidis and a box of matches, and began smoking the aromatic leaf.

"Can you cook?" he asked.

"Yes," said Suraj untruthfully.

"Can you scrub a deck?"

"Why not?"

"Can you sail a ship?"

"I can sail anything."

"Then you'll get to China," said the man.

He leant back against a crate, stuck his dirty feet up on another crate, and puffed contentedly at his bidi.

Suraj finished his apple, took another from the crate, and dug his teeth into it. He took aim with the core of the old apple and tried to hit a telegraph pole, but missed it by metres; it wasn't the same as throwing a cricket ball. Then, to make the apple more interesting, he began to take big bites to see if he could devour it in three mouthfuls. But it took him four bites to finish the apple, so he started on another.

Suraj had always wanted to be in a train, a train that would take him to strange new places, over hundreds and hundreds of kilometres. And here was a train doing just that, and he wasn't quite sure if it was what he really wanted... .

The train was coming to a station. The engine whistled, slowed down. The number of railway lines increased,

crossed, spread out in different directions. Before the train could come to a stop, Suraj's companion came to the door and jumped to the ground.

"You'd better keep out of sight if you don't want to be caught!" he called. And waving his hand, he disappeared into the jungle across the railway tracks.

The train was at a siding. Suraj couldn't see any signs of life, but he heard voices and the sound of carriage doors being opened and closed. He suspected that the apples wouldn't stay in the compartment much longer, so he stuffed one into each pocket, and climbed on to a wooden rack in a corner.

Presently men's voices were heard in the doorway. Two labourers stepped into the compartment and began moving the crates towards the door, where they were taken over by others. Soon the compartment was empty.

Suraj waited until the men had gone away before coming down from the rack. After about five minutes the train started again. It shunted up and down, then gathered speed and went rushing across the plain.

Suraj felt a thrill of anticipation. Where would they be going now? He wondered what his parents would do when he failed to come home that night; they would think he had run away, or been kidnapped, or been involved in an accident. They would have the police out and there would be search parties. Suraj would be famous: the boy who disappeared!

The train came out of the jungle and passed fields of sugarcane and villages of mud huts. Children shouted and waved to the train, though there was no one in it

except Suraj, the guard and the engine-driver. Suraj waved back. Usually he was in a field, waving; today, he was actually on the train.

He was beginning to enjoy the ride. The train would take him to the sea. There would be ships with funnels and ships with sails, and there might even be one to take him across the ocean to some distant land. He felt a bit sorry for his mother and father — they *would* miss him ... they would believe he had been lost for ever... ! But one day, a fortune made, he would return home and then nobody would care any more about school reports and what he ate and why he came home late... Ranji would be waiting for him at the station, and Suraj would bring him back a present — an African lion, perhaps, or a transistor-radio... But he wished Ranji was with him now; he wished the ragged hippy was still with him. An adventure was always more fun when one had company.

He had finished both apples by the time the train showed signs of reaching another station. This time it seemed to be moving into the station itself, not just a siding. It passed a lot of signals and buildings and advertisement-boards before slowing to a halt beside a wide, familiar platform.

Suraj looked out of the door and caught sight of the board bearing the station's name. He was so astonished that he almost fell out of the compartment. He was back in his home town! After travelling forty or fifty kilometres, here he was, home again.

He couldn't understand it. The train hadn't turned, of that he was certain; and it hadn't been moving

backwards, he was certain of that, too. He climbed out of the compartment and looked up and down the platform. Yes, the engine had changed ends! It was only the local apple train.

Suraj glowered angrily at everyone on the platform. It was as though the rest of the world had played a trick on him.

He made his way to the waiting-room and slipped into the street through the back door. He did not want a ticket-collector asking him awkward questions. It had been a free ride, and with that he comforted himself. Shrugging his shoulders, Suraj sauntered down the road to the bazaar. Some day, he thought, he'd take a train and really go somewhere; and he'd buy a ticket, just to make sure of getting there.

"I'm going everywhere," he said fiercely. "I'm going everywhere, and no one can stop me!"